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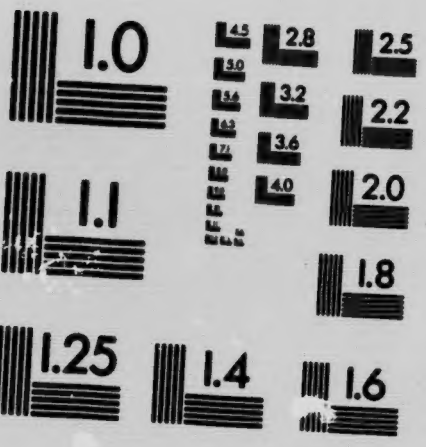
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PEOPLE OF POPHAM

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BY MARY C. E. WEMYSS

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I

It is very difficult for an old bachelor to get any one to argue with him, if he happens to be rich and the ultimate destination of his wealth uncertain.

So I, in the wisdom of my sixteen summers, affirmed that — from a worldly point of view — "Aunt Augusta" was justified in the attitude she adopted with regard to the marriage of her niece Mary Macdermott.

Old Mr. Wallace, Mary's Great-uncle William, questioned with an amused look my knowledge of the world and said, "You are sure of that, quite sure?"

And I stuck to my guns, rather to humour him — since he loved opposition — than to air my own opinions. For I realised that it must be dull to sit in a large room, furnished with deep armchairs, upholstered in dark yellow morocco, and have no one to argue with. I still think unmarried people are more to be pitied on that score than on any other.

Living alone as I do, I know loneliness has its compensations. For instance, it is peaceful to be able to use the wrong end of the toasting-fork, if one likes.

Probably no properly constituted married person would wish to. But she might.

There are women, I believe, who, when their husbands dine out, look forward to having a poached egg on a chair, as a relief from the routine of a regular dinner. Such women, I can imagine, might very naturally turn to the wrong end of a toasting-fork when they were bored to death with the right end. I can imagine worse ways of enforcing one's views on the rights of women. More dangerous ways, at all events.

But to return to the poached egg on a chair! The egg is naturally on a plate, the plate on a tray, and the tray on a chair.

I give these instructions, in detail, in case any one should care to try the experiment. Like so many amateur recipes, "A poached egg on a chair!" errs on the side of simplicity.

My point about the toasting-fork is that people should be allowed to use the wrong end, if they like, and that it is wrong — tyranny, even — that the perfectly innocent words, "I like the wrong end, thank you," said by the most docile wife to the most indulgent husband, should tend to make a temporary estrangement between them. However married one may be, I think the free choice of the ends of a toasting-fork should be allowed one. Otherwise what becomes of one's individuality?

Of course, there is the toast to be thought of. That is another question altogether.

How I came to be in the position, at the age of six-

teen, to argue with a man of Mr. Wallace's age and standing, requires some explanation.

A very old, big, and serious dog rather likes — in a condescending manner, of course — the puppy who dares to stand up to him, when the puppy must know the very serious damage a big dog can do a little one. It is a matter of instinct with puppies, or should be.

Our relative positions were exactly those of the big dog and the puppy. I was n't as brave as the big dog thought me, and I now know the big dog was much gentler than I guessed him.

I was, when I first knew Mr. Wallace, a lodger in the village where he was a respected inhabitant. I was young enough to feel how boring it must be to be respected. So I showed him that lodgers could have opinions of their own irrespective of their age and knowledge of the world. Although if one does n't know something of the world at sixteen, when is one to know it?

Some years later, when I became an inhabitant, I remember asking Jane if she thought I was a respected inhabitant, and she said, "Hardly, miss! People like you very well; but they can't understand why you are n't better looking, when you have such a beautiful sister."

She very kindly added, "Not but what you 've got a nice enough face, miss, and when you 're dressed up and all that, there 's no one looks better I say. Some people can't tell you from Miss Viole . can't go that far, myself; but I 'm not sure that your face is n't

a more useful one for every-day wear, so to speak. Then there 's no call for a fuss if you are n't looking your best, as there is with beauties!"

I became a lodger in Little Popham, because Jane's sister — Jane was my maid, called at that time Somerset — happened to have one downstair room and two upstair rooms unlet at the very moment I wanted them. Recovering as I was from measles, Somerset held the opinion, very strongly, that with a complexion like mine, it was n't every one who would care to have me.

"I know," I said meekly.

She went on to say I was very lucky to get the rooms, as they were never unlet for more than two minutes, and I could n't have got them at all if a bishop had n't fallen through.

"It 's very kind of your sister to have me," I said, "especially when she is accustomed to bishops."

Then Somerset said that bishops' complexions were n't always what they might be, which comforted me very much.

If the bishop had fallen through the rooms, I should not have been surprised. There were such very deep depressions in the floors. I asked Somerset if the bishop was a very heavy man, and she said she had never heard that he was n't all that a bishop ought to be.

If it had n't been for measles I should have returned to India with my sister, and I should never have known Little Popham, nor heard about Mary Macdermott.

It was arranged that I should go out to India when my complexion had recovered its usual brilliancy. It was quite extraordinary how long it took to do this. I used to look in the glass and it seemed to me to be all right. But Somerset said she knew what an English lady's skin ought to look like, and she was n't going to give the natives anything to go on. I did n't quite understand that, but I did understand that she was enjoying herself at Little Popham, so was I; so at Little Popham we stayed until my complexion recovered and the postman married.

If the postman had remained single I imagine my complexion would have taken even longer than it did to regain its usual brilliancy. I may be doing Somerset an injustice.

Anyhow to India we went, Somerset and I, and for two years I lived with my father. At his death I went to live with my sister, who was married.

There are those in Little Popham who say, "You stayed with your dear father two years?"

"Yes, two years."

"And with your very charming sister two years?"

I nod.

"Then you were four years in India, dear, and you were seventeen when you left Little Popham?"

I nod again.

"And you have been an inhabitant in Little Popham ten years?"

"Ten years," I murmur.

There are those in Little Popham who proceed,

under the cover of one hand, to do five-fingered exercises in their lap with the other. Provided they are good mathematicians they exclaim, after a reasonable pause, "Then you *are* about thirty?"

And I say, "About."

Having got so far, they try to go a little farther.

"And why did n't you stay with your sister? Why did you come back to Little Popham?"

"Because where my heart goes I invariably follow."

"Y-e-s, but —"

That is all I choose to tell them, and it explains so little. There are those in Little Popham who have every right to feel defrauded.

But this is anticipating. At this stage of the story I was still a lodger listening to old Mr. Wallace. The first I heard of Mary Macdermott was in a letter he read to me written by "Aunt Augusta." It ran as follows: —

DEAR UNCLE WILLIAM, — You evidently misread my letter. I do not blame the child, but I do think it is hard that a woman who has already five daughters of her own should be called upon to adopt an unknown niece. I never murmured when my own children were born, but accepted each as it came — realising that these things are not of our own ordering — entirely.

You say it is as easy to have four girls in the schoolroom as it is to have three. There you are a little mistaken.

I distinctly stated when I engaged Mademoiselle that she should have only three. An additional pupil would mean a rise of salary, and I do not feel, at the moment, justified in giving it.

Mademoiselle only left the Duchess because she imposed an extra girl on her without warning, as it were. It was Lady Teresa, the fat one, no, the thin one. The fat one Mademoiselle had from the first, because she was so very successful with her figure. It was partly on that account the Duchess was so distressed at losing her. She has done wonders with Angela's waist, already.

All the Duchess's girls are good-looking, but Mademoiselle says, considering what they are and who they are, very backward for their ages, which ours are not, distinctly not. I won't enter into details, but there is Hackle! She goes to do Angela's hair at eight — she does it so well — we very seldom have a hairdresser in, very seldom. Then she comes to me at half-past eight. We breakfast at nine, sharp. Hackle could n't possibly get another hair done in the time. I should n't like to ask her. This, dear Uncle, may seem trivial to you, but it is just these things that make the ordering of a house difficult. I can tell by the tone of your letter that the governess question is what you do not understand. One has to be so careful with foreigners. When I wrote to Mary I made a point of asking her if she was good-looking, and she does n't answer the question. That very plainly, to my mind, shows that she is n't. It would have been

so easy for her, perfectly modestly, to say she was, if she could say so with truth.

I am praying for guidance, how to receive her. Irish people are so impulsive. Baby is trying to talk. The other day she went on saying something, and we could *not* understand what it was. At last it dawned upon us! She was saying Great-uncle William! I *was* so glad.

Your distracted and affectionate niece,

AUGUSTA PITT.

P. S. On re-reading your letter I see that you do not mention the governess. I thought it was you! And you say Mary is nineteen! How do you remember that? My Angela is the same age.

Mr. Wallace laughed and gave me the letter to keep, saying it might come in useful. "If ever you have a Great-uncle William with a little money to leave, don't write him a letter like that. There 's not one of those children that has n't said, 'Great-uncle William' directly it could utter."

From that time on things moved quickly. Every day there was fresh news. I used to go up to Mr. Wallace directly after breakfast to hear it. One morning he told me that "Aunt Augusta" was coming down to spend the day with him.

"Shall I see her?" I asked.

"You shall entertain her," he said.

"Me?"

"You."

Then he said he was going up to town to see for himself what the girl was like.

"The very day Mrs. Pitt is coming?" I said.

"The very day."

I told him I thought it was rather rude; and he said, "*Do you*, Miss?"

Then he told me to go upstairs and bring down the left-hand top drawer of his wardrobe.

I brought it down.

In it were laid in their dozens tie-cases and handkerchief sachets, mostly worked in forget-me-nots by his loving nieces, Angela, Edith, Clarissa, and others.

"Never you dare to work me anything," he said.

And I promised.

It was undoubtedly very wrong of Mr. Wallace to go to town the very day Aunt Augusta came down. But think what I learned!

She told me everything, far more than she realised. I don't suppose she meant to tell me that she was afraid Great-uncle William would leave his money to Mary instead of to her children. But she did. "Although I don't suppose he *would* do such a thing?" she said. I had only the stored wisdom of sixteen years to draw upon, but I knew Somerset did n't think much of men, so I said, you never could tell with men.

Aunt Augusta started at this, and said it was a great pity when children talked of things they did n't understand. That was the worst of India.

I was so afraid that she would stop telling me things, that I said I was sure Mr. Wallace would n't, because only that morning he had been showing me the lovely tie-cases.

That appeased her, and she went on telling me all sorts of things.

When Mr. Wallace came down in the evening he seemed very much amused. He only answered Aunt Augusta's questions with a soft chuckle. Occasionally he said under his breath, "Beautiful, beautiful," and I knew it must be of Mary he was thinking.

Aunt Augusta said, "You were n't disappointed?"

And he laughed.

When she asked him if there was any news in Town, he said, "None; my man of business says the weather is bad for sweet-peas. I said we had nothing to complain of."

Then pressed for further news, he said his man of business thought he was thinner than when he had last seen him. "But, then, he has n't seen me, Augusta, since your eldest child was born."

Man of business? — Aunt Augusta flushed a deep red at the mere mention of the word.

When years later it transpired that Mr. Wallace had left all he had to Mary, I wondered if he had really done anything that day.

I remembered Aunt Augusta's blush. In fact, to this day I never see red geraniums without thinking of it.

Aunt Augusta went back to Town by a late train,

and for that evening Great-uncle William became the listener.

I had more to tell than he had; but what he had to tell me he had seen with his own eyes. That made his information of enormous value.

In time the news of Mary's engagement reached Little Popham. Then it was that I said that, from a worldly point of view, Aunt Augusta was justified in the attitude she adopted.

I took up that position only for the sake of argument. It made Mr. Wallace talk, and that was what he liked.

For me, as a listener pure and simple, it was easy to judge and difficult to condemn. So far as I was concerned I should never have been anything but her abject slave, I know. And I did not see her until she was older, and I suppose a little less lovely than when her Uncle John and Aunt Augusta first saw her. I wonder!

Their position must have been a difficult one. As to what my power of resistance would have been if I had seen her then, I can hardly imagine. It remains an open question whether the younger heart or the older is the more capable of the blinder adoration. I should no doubt have said, "Why should n't she marry any one she likes?"

All I have to tell of Mary's life before she came to the village I have gathered from reliable sources. I have learned a great deal from Peggy. There is very little she does n't know.

What she is most certain about relates to the time before she "came." She is given to wondering how her mother liked that time. She thinks it must have been very dull. When she feels lonely and a little sad, she puts her arms round her mother's neck and says, "Are you glad I came?"

In moments of the deepest confidence she has told me that she was at her mother's wedding. So it shows that one can't always rely on the truth of what one hears, even when it is told one by eye-witnesses.

I have never questioned Peggy's authority. She would naturally resent it.

But this is anticipating; Peggy doesn't, of course, appear on the scene for years.

There was one other source of information. An elderly cousin came to stay the night with Mr. Wallace.

I knew because the postman told me so. He did not prepare me, though, for the invitation to dinner which came in the course of the day. I jumped at it and flew to ask Somerset what I should wear. I walked through the village a few minutes before the hour named for dinner, escorted by Somerset.

I remember demurring and asking why I could n't go by myself? And she said, "You must remember you 've been in India, Miss." It seemed a little irrelevant, but still Somerset generally had a good reason for everything, and in those days I did not dispute her authority. It is a little sad to think how willingly she lets me walk alone through the village now.

I remember every detail of that evening, from Mr. Wallace's white waistcoat to his cousin's laughing eyes.

Aunt Augusta lurked in their twinkle, I felt sure.

I remembered Mr. Wallace had told me about this cousin, and had said he liked her because she never tried to find out how many marbles he had. At the time I wondered what he meant; now I know.

We settled ourselves down in the library after dinner, and the silence was tense with excitement — to me. No word of Mary had been spoken. We drank our coffee; the cups were fetched; a log was put on the fire, and the door was softly closed.

Then the cousin said, "It really is funny — to see Augusta."

She laughed, and I settled myself down to listen.

"I can't begin," she said, "until that child takes her big eyes off me."

Abashed, I turned them on Mr. Wallace.

He had hidden his face behind his hand. I could not see it.

We had a delightful evening.

II

Now to be fair to "Aunt Augusta" with regard to Mary's marriage! She had perhaps some grounds for complaint, inasmuch as it was she who had launched Mary into the great world, clothed her indescribable beauty in garments sufficiently, if not altogether, beautiful, and bestowed upon her as much affection as a woman of Aunt Augusta's type is capable of bestowing on the beautiful child of another woman.

There are limits to such love. It is bounded on the one side by the nature of the giver, on the other by the degree of the recipient's beauty.

However, when Mary proved to be possessed of an extraordinary beauty, hard to forgive, but possibly negotiable, that beauty became a valuable asset and lent a reflected glory to all those who came within its radius.

And the aunt looked upon it as her very right and just reward that Mary should make a brilliant marriage and so repay to some extent the kindness that had been shown her.

So long as Aunt Augusta saw this possibility, she was more or less content, and the possibility should after all be a certainty, and she thought it was until it dawned upon her that Mary bowed as sweetly to the piano-tuner as she did to the most eligible of young men.

Knowing her as I do now, I should have said, more

sweetly, but for information I must depend on what I hear, although it is a dangerous thing to do.

We are told by those in authority — not necessarily themselves historians — that in every two lines of history, there are three mistakes. So I must be content if a very little of what I hear is true.

It was at this juncture of Mary's career that her Aunt Augusta began to be afraid.

The bow may have had something to do with Mary's descent from kings; Irish, of course. People descended from English kings must be rare, or else they lack distinction. It is certain, no glamour surrounds them. But being descended from Irish kings makes a difference, particularly in bows.

I wonder why!

The history of Irish kings has been admirably and tersely put in Whitaker, in the following manner: —

"King so-and-so, killed by his successor," and so on, down a long line.

Now why should such people leave a legacy of wit and beauty to their descendants?

To bow as Mary did, should after all have done no harm. The better the bow, the more abject should the piano-tuner have been.

A piano-tuner may be poor, but he is not necessarily blind. He can be so if he chooses. Of one so fortunate as to be deaf, I have never heard.

Aunt Augusta objected also to Mary's smiling at poor people. She argued that smiles should be kept

for those who, from their social and pecuniary position, were entitled to them.

Aunt Augusta would not, I believe, debar poor people from all enjoyment, and she has been known to express pity for them. But she says poverty must be borne cheerfully and without murmuring, since it is a thing people bring largely on themselves, or is sent for a direct purpose, by a higher power.

She is quick to see the finger of Providence in misfortune — the misfortune of others — and holds the strange theory that because the Bible says the poor will be with us always, that it would be frustrating the Divine purpose to alleviate their distress or ameliorate their lot; beyond certain limits, which are covered by the bestowal — without a smile — of soup and coal tickets.

It is a pleasant theory, and ensures at least fairly comfortable sleep at night.

But to Mary it was a new gospel, and she failed to grasp the justice of the teaching. When she asked Aunt Augusta if she was n't sorry for people who had no joy in their lives, Aunt Augusta said every one had some joy, and the less people had the more they enjoyed it.

"But imagine," said Mary, unconvinced, "going all through life taking down awnings."

Then Aunt Augusta said she did n't know what Mary meant. But if she meant awnings for weddings, of course poor people did n't have them, and no self-respecting poor person would expect them. And if

she meant that they spent their lives in putting up awnings or taking them down, — it was irrelevant which, — then it argued constant and regular employment, for which they should be grateful. We must presume there was no answer to this.

Mary had lived with an uncle in Ireland until he died. He did what he could for her, in leaving her everything he had. That he had nothing to leave, was not his fault. The blame must therefore lie at the door of others.

Mary set out for London with a few possessions, among them a pearl necklace, a miniature of a very beautiful grandmother, and her great-grandmother's tea-set.

Not much to start life with!

And she didn't start even with a tea-set intact — for this reason. The old butler packed it himself, with great care. And to make quite sure, wrote "This side up with care," on all four sides! An English mind will readily realise the consequences, whereas an Irish one could hardly be expected to anticipate them.

So much of the best in Irish effort is so often uselessly expended. An Englishman would never have labelled a case in that way. He would, in all probability, have sent it off without a caution of any kind, which shows that two minds can arrive at the same end by very different ways.

In this case the Irishman would have had the joke on his side, on all four sides, to be accurate.

It was an Irishman, if not strictly one by birth, I

heard say, on the top of a 'bus on a hot summer's day, that he did not mind the heat. He had been in all five quarters of the world, and was accustomed to being born in hot climates.

Well, Mary arrived, and she took most hearts by storm; all, really, if Aunt Augusta had had the honesty to admit it. Uncle John said nothing like her beauty had been seen for years. Aunt Augusta demurred, and named some beauty at the moment reigning, and Uncle John said, "Psch," or some such word as rude and as expressive.

Angela thought her lovely; and if she, as the beauty of the family, looked a little sadly at herself in the glass that first night, she was not to blame. She had to readjust her ideas, that was all. She had the satisfaction of hearing, almost at once, that Mary thought her auburn hair lovely, and of hearing, too, that her eyes were the colour of a burn in spate.

Angela, sitting on her bed, — she and Mary slept together the first night in case Mary should feel nervous, — heard this with satisfaction, tempered with curiosity. She wondered, no doubt, what *was* the colour of a burn in spate?

Angela, it appeared, was very anxious to know if Mary had ever had a proposal, but something in Mary's face made it difficult to ask the question straight out. So she beat about the bush, and said, among other things, that her mother said that she, Angela, would never have a proposal, if it was n't for her small waist.

Mary widened her eyes at this, and clasped her hands round her own slim waist, and said "Humph!"

This emboldened Angela to ask if Mary had found this, and Mary said she wondered. The two proposals she had had —

Two!

I can see Angela sitting up straight at this, her eyes brightening with interest, scarcely daring to breathe, in case her wonderful cousin should cease to confide.

Well, one was on the top of a coach. She had worn an old hunting coat of Uncle Pat's, so no waist had been visible.

"But then," said Angela, "he had seen you before?"

"Never," said Mary.

"The first time, Mary?"

Mary nodded. "It was a very long drive, and there was a thunder-storm most of the time, you see."

"What did your uncle say?"

"He was angry, he always was."

"Were n't they eligible?"

"Eligible?" said Mary. "I don't know. I think I was too young. It is n't a very interesting thing to talk about, is it?"

That Angela must have been disappointed, I know. But she says she never saw anything so beautiful as Mary looked, in her nightgown, too! She wondered what she would look in a ball dress! I think not quite so beautiful, possibly.

Mary's thoughts that night were away in her dear

Ireland, and if she had an overpowering wish, it was that she might open the windows wide, and look out on to her beloved hills, and let in the cool night breeze that blows over them. Instead of which she opened the window on to roofs and chimney-pots.

When Uncle John said Mary must have clothes and money to buy them with, she said she had lots of clothes and money.

He doubted whether she would have enough of either.

"Is every one poor in Ireland?" asked Angela.

"Oh, no, I don't think so," said Mary; "at least, I never thought about it."

She was sure of it when later the glories of a London dressmaker were revealed to her.

She knew that Mrs. O'Brien had gone to Court in Dublin with a lace curtain for a train; but something, loyalty perhaps, prevented her telling Angela so. She would not understand that it had not detracted one atom from the grace of Mrs. O'Brien's curtsey, nor made her any the less beautiful.

I wonder if Mary wished some of her Irish friends could have seen her dressed for her first London ball.

Old Sir Charles told some one he gasped when he first saw her. It must always be a sensation to see the most beautiful creature you have ever seen in your life. It is a sensation that comes fairly often to some people, yet I doubt that it ever completely loses its novelty.

For an account of Mary's first ball I am largely in-

debted to the elderly cousin. I imagine I should have heard more if Great-uncle William had not been listening too.

To begin with, Mary did her own hair, and that called for protest on the part of Aunt Augusta. But nothing would induce Mary to have her hair brushed tightly, as was then the fashion.

Moreover, she suggested doing Angela's.

Now, that was more than Aunt Augusta could stand, and she pursed up her lips and said that the hairdresser had already done it.

"Yes, but dear, dear Aunt Augusta, it should sweep away from Angela's face like Lady Hamilton's, you know!"

Then Aunt Augusta pulled herself up and said, "What do you know about Lady Hamilton?"

"Oh, everything," said Mary. "We had such a lovely picture of her at home. Dear Uncle Pat had to sell it when things were very bad, at one time. A man came from London and said it was an indifferent Romney—if a Romney at all. Then, when Uncle Pat gave him two days' fishing and he caught several salmon, he said it was a better Romney than he had thought. But Uncle Pat said, 'Business is business,' and our Romney went away, and what we got for it lasted such a short time, it hardly seemed worth while."

"Your uncle was cheated, no doubt, and it was foolish of him to give that sort of man salmon fishing; he wouldn't think any the more of him for it.

As to Lady Hamilton, I can see nothing to admire in her."

I can hear Aunt Augusta say that in such a voice as to convince me that she was the woman who refused to hang a beautiful "Sir Joshua" on her wall, because the fair subject of the portrait, while avowedly not a spinster, wore no wedding ring. An example must be set.

"Don't you?" said Mary. "Uncle Pat said she was the fate of circumstances, the tool of selfish men. Ah! yes, Lord Nelson — she was to blame, but then, Aunt Augusta, it won't do Angela any harm if she wears her hair like that. Uncle Pat always said it was as impossible for there to be another Nelson as it was that there should be another Julius Cæsar. So Angela runs no particular danger." Before Aunt Augusta could say anything, Mary had undone the work of hours.

Angela says it was a revelation when she looked at herself in the glass, and even Aunt Augusta had to admit that it was an improvement, although it looked odd.

I expect Mary followed modestly in the wake of Aunt Augusta and Angela. Old Sir Charles said every one who saw Angela come into the ballroom said to themselves or to some one else, "What can have happened to Angela Pitt?"

Then they saw Mary.

It was then that Sir Charles is said to have gasped, and he said there was n't a heart, masculine or femi-

nine either, that did n't beat faster, not for quite the same reason, perhaps, but that has nothing to do with the story.

Mary's progress throughout the evening was a triumphant one, and Aunt Augusta — from her seat among the chaperones — saw her as the wife of a rising diplomat, as an ambassadress, a countess, a marchioness, a duchess, a princess, why not? And she saw, no doubt, portals thrown open to Angela, Edith, Maud, Clarissa, to say nothing of the boys.

I don't know whether a diamond stomacher, nowadays, lifts chaperones out of the ruck. I don't know that any one has one in the village, or within seven miles of it; Lady Victoria may have. Anyhow it weighed heavily in Aunt Augusta's social sphere, and her tiara to match was of truly noble proportions. I can see her patting her stomacher as she replied to the stream of questions about Mary.

Where had the lovely niece sprung from?

"Spring is hardly the word. She lived in Ireland with an uncle. The other side of the family — at Ballyknocky Castle. He was so devoted to her, that he could hardly bear her out of his sight. Quite natural? Of course, but he should have remembered there were other relations just as anxious to have her! He was a charming man. Yes — a beautiful place. — Money? Well, as much as most Irish landowners. He had a wonderful collection of Romneys! Mary like Lady Hamilton? Well, perhaps, but her hair was too dark, and she looked more of a lady — naturally."

And so on all through the evening. Over and over again did Aunt Augusta say, "Spring is hardly the word."

By the end of the evening I expect she came to believe in the collection of Romneys. In due course of time she went down to supper. She was careful never to go down one of the first, because being stout, she said, it gave people a wrong impression.

She left Mary dancing with a partner in every way most suitable. Quite the sort of young man any woman would be pleased to call nephew, failing the possibility of calling him son-in-law. If she could have guessed while she lingered over her supper that Mary had got rid of her most desirable partner, — dismissing him with one of the most radiant of her smiles, — and was talking out on the balcony to another, who had none of the qualifications essential in partners from an aunt's point of view, she would have hurried upstairs, and the whole of Mary's life would have been altered — if one can believe that Destiny can be changed by so small a thing as the number of quails and ices and peaches and strawberries eaten or not eaten by greedy or abstemious chaperones.

Mary certainly would not have believed it.

Whether she really knew the moment she saw David Howard that she had met her fate, only Peggy knows. She certainly has been heard to say that she fell in love with him before he fell in love with her. But that is explained by the fact that as she stepped out on to the balcony she was back to the lighted ballroom, whereas

he faced it. By that it will be gathered that he was in the balcony and that she found him there. She says that it only shows that they were meant to meet. He was not far behind in falling in love, because when Mary turned round, she faced the light, and he stepped back; it was then his face that was in shadow, which was perhaps as well. Even Mary's Irish lovers had been slower to declare their love. Words, after all, are but impotent things wherewith to express what one most feels — and slow things, too!

I begin to wonder if I shall ever get to the time when the Howards came to the village. So do you, I expect. But I must get them married, first.

I have to depend on Peggy for the true and particular account of that first meeting between her father and mother.

Peggy says her father said he had n't been to a London ball for years, and her mother said, "And I never."

Peggy drops her voice when she says this, and her eyes widen.

"They were never introduced. They did n't know they had to be!"

Then her father said he never danced, and her mother said, was it because he was too big?

Then he went on to say that he hated crowds, and that there was nothing so lonely.

Now Peggy begins to object here; because she is above all things strictly honest, and would never get a thing by false pretences. I have noticed that at games.

She says it was n't fair that her father should have said that he liked to be far away from every one — on a mountain-top — when he knows he can't bear to be alone for one single minute. "He likes mother to stand by him when he writes a cheque, so that shows."

It shows to my mind a depth of guile of which I can find no trace in the back of Mr. Howard, as I see him in church.

Peggy feels very strongly about that mountain-top, and I think myself it was hardly fair. Of course it made an Irish girl long to go, too — seeing how she yearned over her mountains.

Then Mr. Howard went on to say that he had just come back from Africa, and Mary, the daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter of soldiers, said, "Are you a soldier?"

And he, wishing he were, said, "No, nothing so interesting. I have been in all parts of the world — to write, not to fight."

Then apparently they began to talk of travellers in general, and how difficult they found it to settle down to an ordinary life; and if Mary, by chance, asked him if he felt that, it must have placed him in a difficulty, because I expect he had begun to think it would not be so difficult after all.

I dare say he went so far as to wish he might stay where Mary was. And it is not unlikely that he began to wonder what other travellers had dared to say on the subject — confound them! Perhaps they, too, had begun to feel that to settle down would be rather a

wonderful thing. I don't suppose Mary told him what other travellers had said.

Then they began to talk of money, at which Mary frowned. She said, why did money come into everything in England? She was tired of hearing of it. Weren't people just as happy — poor? Then he looked at her dress and smiled. I have myself seen a poor man look pathetically at a dress which has presumably cost a month's pay. It is enough to make any one sad.

So Mary explained that he was wrong — that it was her first real ball dress — by that she meant the first one with a silk foundation. On the other hand, she had worn silk stockings finer than could be bought anywhere in London. But that was only because her grandmother had happened to possess them. Mary stuck out an exquisite foot, which she had in all probability inherited from the same source. So the stockings had cost nothing! Why should she have brought herself into the question at all, when they were discussing abstract poverty?

It is curious how very soon abstract subjects become personal between two people, especially when the subject is even remotely connected with love. There is no doubt that Mr. Howard was wondering on what income it would be possible to live — dressing Mary exactly as she was then dressed. He had never seen any one so lovely.

Then he asked Mary what balls she was going to, and he wrote them down on his shirt-cuff. Peggy wonders if the laundress guessed!

Aunt Augusta gave the elderly cousin a lift home, so from her I heard that Mary sprang into the carriage and said, "How lovely it has been! Thank you so much, Aunt Augusta!" and she kissed her, which must have made Aunt Augusta very shy, because she was n't accustomed to being kissed, between meals — so to speak.

Then Mary said she was going to do Aunt Augusta's hair "à la Marquise."

Then Aunt Augusta said, "My dear Mary, what do you know about marquises?"

"A great deal, why not? Uncle Pat and I read in periods. Some periods he read to me, and he used to say, 'um-um-um' very often. When he put the book down on the table, he used to say, ''Ware book, Mary.' But there *were* very good marquises, pure marquises, devoted-to-good-works marquises."

Angela, with the glamour of Lady Hamilton upon her, said she had had a lovely time, and she patted her hair, which, after all, was the author of her enjoyment. Its thick resistency pleased her, and she felt it again and again on the way home.

I feel sure she did it, because she still does it, and on a basis like that one may write history with impunity. If Angela pats her hair in church now, she undoubtedly did so after a ball in the days of her youth. History-making is largely a matter of assumption.

It would not be difficult, for instance, to assume that if the Fates had allowed Henry the Eighth nine

wives instead of six, he would have been even more famous as a widower than he is now.

It is curious that neither Aunt Augusta nor Angela had seen Mr. Howard, but Mary went to sleep happier than she had ever been, and for the first time in her life she varied her prayers.

This is pure assumption. But I have done the same thing, and I have sometimes wondered in praying for quite a strange young man whether I should say "Mr." or his Christian name! I wonder what Mary did. I am quite certain that she was jealous of that mountain.

Why should he like to be alone?

I know she dreamed of a high, high mountain and on it, in lonely splendour, sat a young man, so tall, so beautiful, with such kind, smiling eyes. But so lonely! And she stood at the base of the mountain — so lonely, too! He was eating bath buns — climbing makes one thirsty — but it did n't detract one bit from the romance. One must eat bath buns if one is thirsty — in dreams.

How should I know all this? Well, as Jane said, I must n't forget I have been in India!

And when I was there, I was eighteen years old, and at that age one dreams that sort of dream. Moreover, there were things to dream about — wonderful subalterns, in gorgeous uniforms — who had done marvellous things on the Frontier!

English boys fresh from school can do these things.

Then there was the atmosphere, and that in India is full of romance.

We have all perhaps dreamed similar things; but it is not given to all of us to dream as Aunt Augusta did, of ambassadors who turned into oyster patties, in the most surprising manner. It was also very startling to find that her sable coat, for which John had given so much, was nothing more than a rissole!

But as a marquise she took it all as a matter of course. To show surprise would have argued a lack of good breeding!

III

PEOPLE from London are wont to say to me, "What do you do all day?" And I say, "Well, I weed."

"And what else?"

"I weed."

"And what then?"

"Well, I weed again."

"Nothing but weed?"

"Weeds grow."

"But don't you get sick of it?"

"Oh, no."

"How dull!"

"They are always different weeds, you see!" I explain.

What they say next entirely depends on the kind of people they are. Lots of them probably think I am "wanting." No doubt I am in some things. But not in interests in life. I take an enormous interest in people, even people I have never seen. That is perhaps very evident.

Anyhow, Mary did take to her new life like a duck to water. An Irishwoman perhaps adapts herself readily to circumstances. Moreover, she started with the air of an empress and the manner of a queen, which of course was natural. If she had been poor in Ireland, she had been treated like a princess. She had

eaten off Sèvres, and had lived with the most courteous of men. These things all count and leave their mark.

Aunt Augusta began to tremble when Mary refused several good offers of marriage — the expression is hers. She was afraid to appear worldly and so alienate Mary; but she carefully drew her attention to the folly of couples marrying without money. She even went to call on a young couple in Chelsea who had no area gate, and took Mary with her. She called having no area gate social ostracism.

But Mary disregarded that, and said how pretty the bride was, and how happy they must be! So Aunt Augusta did n't do it again — the coachman went the slummiest way, too!

Of David Howard, Mary said nothing. Perhaps on the plea that of the things most sacred one can talk least easily. Or perhaps she thought every one knew! They might have known.

Colonel L'Estrange read aright the look in her eyes; that soft, shadowy look.

"She is in love," he said, and it cost him a pang.

There are some men who are never too old to feel a pang of resentment when a beautiful girl marries.

Aunt Augusta was the last to know. Mary told her on their return from a ball.

She went into her room, and I imagine she knelt at Aunt Augusta's feet, and I can guess how lovely she looked.

I am sure it must have flashed through Aunt Au-

gusta's mind that Mary was going to be married. With her disengaged hand I am certain she enumerated the possible men on her four fingers, while she said in her level voice, "What is it, dear?"

"I am going to be married, and I want you to be the first to know. It is all like some wonderful dream, although at my first ball I knew. We met there."

Aunt Augusta must have started at that. "Who is he?"

"David Howard. He 's such a big person, you must have noticed him!"

"Mary!"

Something in Aunt Augusta's voice must have startled Mary, and she rose to her feet. "Aunt Augusta, are you not pleased?"

"Pleased, Mary? But you are over-excited, dear child!"

This attitude she no doubt felt was the wise one. "We will speak to your Uncle John to-morrow."

This was a refuge she seldom sought; but John had his uses.

Then Mary, I believe, said she would tell Uncle John to-morrow.

Now there lies a great difference between telling and speaking to. Any woman must know the expression — "May I speak to you for a moment, ma'am?" It may fall from the lips of the most awe-inspiring butler, the best cook, equally from those of the smallest tweeny. The latter would need the courage, of course. It has its deep significance in all cases. In

such moments the peace of many a household has been wrecked.

Then Aunt Augusta did the "mother," which she did badly enough, poor dear, to her own children.

She said, "Dear child, I stand in the position of a mother to you."

"Then," said Mary, "you will say that you are glad I am so happy;" which was logical, since her memory of a mother was a very precious and wonderful thing.

"I will say," said Aunt Augusta, forgetting her caution, "that it cannot be!"

"Cannot be? It is!"

Never were two words more triumphantly spoken, I know.

Then Aunt Augusta went on to say that Mary was not the first woman to love unwisely. That if her dear Angela fell in love with a man too poor to keep her — in comfort — it would be a mother's duty to forbid the marriage.

I believe Mary laughed at that. I am sure her eyes flashed. She said if the man were too poor to keep her, she would keep him. She was thankful she had not been stifled all her life by money! "My mother married for love!" she said.

Now, what followed, I, as a listener, should never have heard. But these things are sometimes told in moments of self-revelation, and poor Aunt Augusta had these moments.

She said in her haste — I feel sure of that — in an-

swer to Mary's triumphantly spoken "My mother married for love," "Yes, she did, Mary, and other people support her child! You must remember that!"

Aunt Augusta made a bad mistake there. The cruelty of the words served to quiet Mary, but they sank deep into her heart and made a wound hard to heal. I know that it was Peggy who healed it — years afterwards. Healing by the laying on of hands is a power that every baby possesses. Why as we grow older do we lose it?

Mary had never needed a mother more than she needed her then. To do Aunt Augusta justice, she confessed that the memory of the words kept her awake for hours, and that she did not dare tell John. No wonder!

But still she argued to herself, she had done the right thing in opposing an utterly absurd and impossible engagement.

To Angela it did not come as a surprise. A few nights before David proposed, if he ever did propose, Angela said to Mary, as they were sitting talking after a ball, "Mary, don't you think Mr. Howard is the handsomest man you ever saw?" and she sighed.

This frightened Mary, and she said, "Angela darling, I feel I must tell you something. It is beyond my power to help it now, even if I could — for your sake —"

"Oh, thank you so much for telling me. You are an angel! I shall get over it, of course; I always fall in love with very tall men."

Then, of course, came the interview with Uncle John. He, in his heart of hearts, could not blame Howard for taking such a prize if he could get it. But being a practical man and accustomed to reduce everything — love included — to £. s. d., he began to see things from Aunt Augusta's point of view, and he spoke seriously to Mary. How serious it was, we can imagine, with Mary's arms round his neck! It must have been distracting! Having spoken seriously, he said, I believe by way of conciliation, "Do you care very much?" And she said, "Dear Uncle John, I can't say. Have you ever been asked if you love God? If you have, you will know the kind of feeling it gives one!"

Uncle John knew the feeling very well. He had once in church slept through the sermon, and soundly on, until he had awakened to find himself at an "after meeting," and as he awoke from a sound sleep, the very question was put to him.

"It is not a thing one can measure in words," continued Mary; "do you understand?"

Uncle John understood, in part. Perhaps he had had other loves in his life than Aunt Augusta.

Now I can really speak of what I know, having heard it from Great-uncle William. He, at least, was pleased with the engagement, and he chuckled whenever he thought of it. That, Aunt Augusta said, was cynical. However, he wrote a few kind words to Mary, and sent her five diamond stars.

Nowadays, perhaps, the deepest affection is expressed

otherwise than in diamond stars. But expression in jewellery changes with fashion, as it does in other things, and in those days one could have hardly expected a great-uncle's affection to be better expressed. Mary, who by this time was becoming a little practical, wished it had been a cheque instead; but she was very grateful. She wrote the old man a very pretty letter of thanks, so pretty that he folded it, and put it in a pocket-book he always carried about his person. He read it from time to time, till it gave way at the creases. Then he locked it away in a drawer, and — but that is anticipating — so is the fact that Peggy has the letter still in her Bible. She has mended it with stamp paper, and she values it, because it was written by mother, and belonged to the time before "she came."

The wedding took place in August. Aunt Augusta wore what had been her best dress through the summer. As no one was in town, it was quite good enough. She said it was desirable that the bridesmaids should be very simply dressed.

It is said that Aunt Augusta suggested that Mary should not buy a sealskin coat in her trousseau, David not being well-off! It is also said that Mary pleaded that the sealskin would last so long, and would cut up — or down — for the children.

It is quite possible that Aunt Augusta said, "My dear Mary, what do you know about children?"

Well, Mary went away, and she left a very big blank in the large house in Portland Place. How

empty the house seemed no one knew better than Uncle John. Angela cried herself to sleep every night for weeks. Aunt Augusta, in her turn, was ready to cry with rage and mortification. She knew that many people would never come to the house again who had come for the sake of the beautiful Irish girl. Angela's hair would of necessity be scraped back, and her own glory as a marquise would become a thing of the past. She had a maid with a non-conformist conscience, who could not bring herself to countenance flummeries of any sort or description. A French marquise was one thing, and a respectable lady in Portland Place another. The one was as God made her; the other owed more to man than the Almighty. At least, such was Hackle's idea of a French marquise. Anyhow, a respectable lady should wear her hair as God intended, and Hackle was there to see it was done. Now Hackle was an excellent maid, and Aunt Augusta held her peace.

When Aunt Augusta tentatively remarked that it was strange that Miss Mary's hair should be so very beautiful and her own — not, Hackle said she supposed the Almighty realised the responsibility of making such a creature as Miss Mary! He did n't often do it — that was certain.

In course of time David and Mary settled down in their house in Chelsea. That some of the rooms were panelled was a source of the greatest wonder and delight to them both. Aunt Augusta, it must be presumed, was longing to see it; but as she had not

forgiven Mary, her pride would not allow her to say so.

When Angela described it to her in ecstatic raptures, Aunt Augusta told her not to talk nonsense. It was impossible that there should be anything charming in the house at all, and a house without an area was —

Angela remembered "social something."

It was left to Uncle John to break to Aunt Augusta that Mary was expecting her baby.

"I knew it was inevitable," said Aunt Augusta. That was all. She was knitting at the time, and she dropped a whole needleful of stitches, so she did show some emotion, although Uncle John did n't recognise it.

When the baby came, Aunt Augusta had to go to the house in Chelsea. In honour of Mary the coachman did not go the slummiest way. Aunt Augusta was bound to admit that the baby was beautiful, and she came away feeling a deep resentment against him for being plain baby Howard when he might have been anything if his mother had been wiser. She was angry, too, with Mary for looking so radiant. It was attaching undue importance to a very ordinary and perfectly natural consequence of an improvident marriage. But the Irish, she argued, were prone to exaggerate.

Even the doctor conspired to make Mary feel she had done the right thing instead of a very foolish, absurd, if not wicked one.

But Mary said — the baby being inevitable — Aunt Augusta allowed that — she might just as well forgive him, and at the same time his mother! Aunt Augusta, wishing to see the justice of that, began to forgive Mary her lapse from common sense, and told her quite kindly how very wrong it was to bring children into the world if you could not afford to educate them. When Mary suggested that love was in itself an education, Aunt Augusta smiled indulgently. Some one had told her that Mary was so amusing.

When she found that Mary moved in circles far beyond her own social horizon, she began to more than forgive. She was even seen by Angela to poke her finger surreptitiously through the baby's curls of gold, which was a real sign of forgiveness on the part of Aunt Augusta.

She had never done such a thing to her own children. "But then," said Angela, "their hair was straight;" which shows that if Angela was matter-of-fact she had a sense of justice.

I believe Aunt Augusta's heart was hard from want of using. Having children had never made a mother of her. That was the secret of the whole thing.

So Aunt Augusta began to undergo a softening process. But she ossified again when Mary dared to have another baby. This time her fingers refrained from touching its curls, and she was deaf to the descriptions of its beauty. The house in Chelsea knew her no more. Mary had brought it on herself. One baby had been — as she had said — inevitable — a

concession to custom! But to have another was flying in the face of Providence.

In course of time Mary flew in the face of Providence five times. Her wings each time carried her to the very gates of Heaven itself, and that Providence was glad to see her and was kind to her, was evident, for each time she returned with a baby more beautiful than the last, and with the Glory of God shining in her eyes.

In the mean time Great-uncle William was growing old. I would sit with him by the hour, and sometimes he would fall asleep. One day he fell asleep — talking of Mary. He never woke again.

When Mary heard of his death, she was very sorry, for she never forgot any one who was kind to her. She had always had a feeling of fondness for the old man who had refrained from telling her she was foolish when she married. But she had no idea that he had cared for her much. When she heard that he had left her, not only a house in the country, but what seemed to her at the time unlimited riches, she was moved to tears. She wished she had known that he had cared. And why had he? She was told later that he died speaking of her and on her wedding day, which seemed strange and touching.

Then she became troubled when she remembered — after the first excitement was over — that it was Uncle John who had expected everything for his children.

With this troubling her she went to the lawyer to

ask if it were possible for her to give up her newly acquired riches. But this, she was told, was not possible. The will was plainly worded, and there could be no question of disputing it. "Mr. Wallace was a particularly level-headed man." The lawyer probably thought he was also a man of much taste and discrimination.

So Mary went to see Aunt Augusta, who showed her very plainly that she considered the will an egregiously unfair one! Wicked, even! That Mary, in trying to make restitution, was only doing what any decent-minded person would do. That her desire to do it sprang from no higher motive than a fear to be thought cheating and grasping! People would think that, of course.

However, there it was — wicked things did constantly happen — every day, in fact. They surrounded one on every side!

Uncle John scouted the idea that the will was unfair; was indignant that Mary should ever have thought of such a thing, and expressed his very real and deep delight at the good fortune that had befallen her.

"I have often wished that I could do something for you, my child; but I have so many claims upon me."

During those last months that Mary was in London, Uncle John went oftener to the house in Chelsea. He would sit watching Mary playing with her children, and he told her one day how she had altered

his life, had brought him even within sight of the God he had begun to forget. Mary had laid her hand on his, and had said, "Dear Uncle John, I can hardly believe He was ever out of sight; you, perhaps, had grown short-sighted."

And he had smiled and said, "Are you spectacles to blind eyes, as well as everything else?"

He often wished his Angela was as happy as Mary.

"But," Mary used to say, "Angela would not be happy as I am. She wants all her creature comforts and her riches. Supposing her drawing-room carpet had a hole in it past mending, what would she do?"

"Make her husband very unhappy, I am afraid," ventured Uncle John.

"No, not that, I am sure. But you see I put an armchair over the spot, sit a delightful and charming friend in the chair, and what matters the hole? My only trouble is when some English person takes upon himself to move the chair."

"You are a wonderful creature, Mary."

"No, I am Irish. I should be wasted on a rich husband. And yet — I could spend money on the children!"

"They have got more — in their mother — than money could ever buy, and everywhere I hear of David's cleverness."

Here I am sure Mary must have smiled as she always does when she even thinks of David — such a wonderful smile. He is, after all, the most difficult of all her children to manage, therefore the most loved.

"Dear, dear David, he is clever, clever, but it's not the sort of cleverness that will ever pay."

Pay? There lay the sting. It cost money to bring up children. Great-uncle William had made it possible.

"Mary" ceases to be an historical character and becomes Mrs. Howard.

Now I can speak with authority as one who knows.

IV

The Howards were coming down to see their new home. It was known all through the village.

I went round to see what Wisdom had done to make the house look nice. It looked so dreary that I took upon myself to go up to the door, ring the bell, and ask Wisdom why all the blinds were down. Mr. Wallace had had no hand in pulling them down, so why should n't they be pulled up?

Wisdom lugubriously remarked that there was time enough for change.

"Yes, but, Wisdom," I said, "it looks a little depressing for people to arrive at their new home and find it all in darkness."

So I pulled up the blinds. That 's how it came about — through the obstinacy and disagreeableness of Solomon Wisdom, and not because of a certain officiousness in my character — that Mrs. Durnford says she suspected the first time she saw me.

She affirms that I was stroking the wrong end of a pig tied up in a sack. I could n't see that there was a wrong end to a pig, under such circumstances. It might comfort either end to be stroked. One never can tell. That there was a sad end, I feel horribly certain.

Mrs. Durnford says it was only one of many instances.

Mrs. Durnford is our Doctor's wife.

To return to Solomon Wisdom! He said we should see how it turned out.

"Of course we shall, and why should n't it turn out well? Mrs. Howard is a lovely lady, with charming children, and Mr. Howard is a charming gentleman. Besides, Wisdom, if Mr. Wallace thought Mrs. Howard worthy of —"

"Yes, miss, but still it 's a change. There was a time when things did n't change."

"Of course, Wisdom, I quite see, but things must change. What d' you say to a few flowers? They make such a difference in a room."

"Everything makes a difference, it seems to me. If it were n't for my haricot veins, I might have picked some myself."

This was permission enough, and I picked, while Wisdom looked on and murmured to himself.

I did what I could to make the house look cheerful for the woman who had touched the heart of Great-uncle William, and having done so, I stole away so that she and her husband should enter into their kingdom together.

I afterwards heard that Mrs. Howard declared that as a house it was neither large nor small. She affirmed that it contained the maximum of room in the minimum of space. It was altogether wonderful considering that it had been the house of a bachelor.

How could he have remained a bachelor? Mr. Howard did n't know. He was measuring floor space

at the time, and could n't give his undivided attention to the question.

The house called for children. It stood with arms outstretched. So she declared. And it was built in such a way as to warrant the conceit. The wings might have stood for arms. The passages undoubtedly demanded their echoes — even I as a spinster could see that.

I wonder what Mr. Howard said to that. How quite perfect husbands — nice husbands, I mean, would be — if they always answered their wives when they spoke to them!

I should like to have seen Mrs. Howard as she sat on a roll of carpet, and surveyed her kingdom.

"Think what it will save!" she said. "Think what the green grocer's book is in London!"

"Wherein parsley even is an item not to be ignored!"

The parsley was Mr. Howard's idea.

To balance the parsley Mrs. Howard thought of the gardener's wages, but said nothing, knowing that there is the right and the wrong time for a wife to remember things. Therein lies, I imagine, the secret of happy married life.

Then a pony — should they keep one?

This time Mr. Howard demurred. But Mrs. Howard, knowing how he loved horses, lit upon a brilliant idea.

It would save buying anything with which to enrich the soil! See? Wisdom supplied the missing word.

But without it they were quick to see, and it was carried unanimously.

Jim, who had arrived at the age of reason, deducted therefrom that two ponies — at that rate — would be a still greater save. Then no — "you know what?" with a nod at Wisdom, "would be wanted." There would also be a carriage and pair — if it was wanted — for weddings, for instance! It was clearly a saving, whichever way they looked at it.

There was a certain amount to be done to the house. It was inevitable. A bachelor could hardly be expected to leave rooms quite as nurseries should be. People would look askance at an old bachelor who furnished nurseries. Therefore they must n't blame him if the nurseries don't exist when they are wanted.

Should Mr. Howard do the necessary painting himself?

It was hardly feasible; besides, was it fair on the local painter? Clearly not!

Wisdom was appealed to. Who was the painter in the village?

There were two!

That complicated matters.

One was paralyzed.

That simplified matters.

It was decided that the one who was not paralyzed should be interviewed, and the one who was should be visited, ministered to, and amends made.

Mrs. Howard wrote down in a pocket-book "pud-

dings paralyzed." I wonder if she knew what it meant, a week later.

The one who is not paralyzed is Bilberry, and he was sent for. It may be presumed that he was not far off, since he came quickly, and he is known to be a slow mover.

What he thought, at first sight, of the lovely lady sitting on a roll of carpet, is not known. His admiration now is no secret.

Mrs. Howard shook hands with him, and so did Mr. Howard. The whole village knew that before many hours were passed. I am sure it must have pleased him very much, as he was wont to complain that he had never touched the skin of the late Vicar.

"Now, Mr. Berry," said Mr. Howard.

"Bilberry, begging your pardon, sir. There 's been no Berry, plain and simple, in this village since before the time my father's grandfather was buried. He died of stepping on a nail, he did. Some say as how Bilberry was just plain Berry once on a time. But there 's no knowing. We 've been Bilberry since longer than any one remembers, and answer to the name according. Not but what we answer to any name, civil spoken. Ebenezer Bilberry is the name. It is written plain over the shop, as folks can see as cares to look; to those as can't read, I 'm not above mentioning my name."

"Well, Mr. Bilberry, I 'm very sorry. I hope in time to know you all so well that there will be no mistakes in names."

"I know as how no offence was meant, seeing as how the name sounds like the short for William Berry."

"Of course," said Mr. Howard. "What I wanted to see you for was to tell you that there is a certain amount that must be done to the house."

Bilberry's face brightened, if such a term could be applied to anything so habitually glum.

"Now we want to do as little as possible."

The flash of sunshine left Bilberry's face, to break out again at Mr. Howard's next words.

"Now what I suggest is this. My one desire is to do my best for you all. Let us therefore be honest with one another. I will tell you frankly what I can afford to put the house in order. Will you say frankly what you can do for a specified sum? Say, to begin with, a hundred pounds! I don't wish you to be unfair to yourself any more than I wish you to be unfair to me. Our interests are identical. Think it over and say just how much you can do, and what you can't do must remain for the present — undone. Do you understand?"

I can picture Bilberry rubbing his dazed eyes — metaphorically, at all events — while he promised to think it over. He had never embarked on so much thinking in all his life, I am sure. Whether he promised or not there was very little chance of his thinking of anything else for weeks to come.

How much could he do for one hundred pounds — in fairness to his own family — without endangering

his own peace of mind with regard to Mr. Howard and his wife and family?

How much could he not do — for one hundred pounds?

How much could he get off doing — for one hundred pounds?

He spent hours over a mental estimate, and finally decided to see how it worked out — as he went along.

Mrs. Howard, too, spent some time over her estimate, and finally arrived at the same conclusion.

Mrs. Howard's calculations erred not on the mental side, but they were something like this.

On one side of the paper — at the top — she put London. On the opposite side — Country — and underlined them both with a very straight and decided line. She then proceeded to draw babies on the margins — and cherubs. Then a rough plan of the garden, and so on, until the paper was spoilt. So she had to do it all over again. London on one side, Country on the other. Under both she drew a very straight and decided line.

Under each heading she entered the same items of expenditure.

London.	Country.
Rent. £100	None.
Rates & taxes, not sure	None to speak of.
Butcher, say £80	Very little — game and rabbits.
Baker, £30	£30.
Greengrocer, £70	None.
Poulterer, depends so much on amount of chickens.	None, our own poor dear chickens.
Fishmonger, £40	When possible.

London.	Country.
Clothes	Much less than London.
Doctor, varies	Difficult to say, depends whether fewer infectious cases.
Education, our own dear governess	Same. Thankful!
Servant's wages, same	Same.
Washing, same	Same.

Save presumedly enormous. Expenses of stables amply repaid. No eggs to buy — own chickens — chicken food very small expense. Pigs ditto.

This document Mrs. Howard filed and docketed; but as to adding it up! It seemed impossible. But a glance served to show how much cheaper the country was.

Whether Bilberry did as much as he could for one hundred pounds remains a matter between himself and his Maker.

He was seen to pray more fervently than of yore, and if he was praying for mercy Mr. Howard would be the last to suspect it. Neither did Mrs. Howard. She loves his dear old face, and the children love to press — gently — the blisters in the white paint. Jack made a heavenly discovery one day while in the corner, — that the paint would all peel off! It enormously mitigated the severity of the punishment — of that punishment.

Mrs. Howard was afraid that Bilberry might have robbed himself. I doubt it. Bilberry began to think he had; but said he would do it all over again for the love of her beautiful face. In course of years I am sure he will do it all over again — if not exactly for love.

Then there was Solomon Wisdom; he comes into that first day, when the Howards came to inspect their kingdom.

He was provided for by Great-uncle William. It was, in the eyes of the villagers, a very enviable position. But provided for or not, it was no joke turning out of a cottage in which one had lived and he was wont to say — died. That was the crux of the matter. He meant to die in the cottage. He would die nowhere else. If he had wanted to die anywhere else, he would have lived according. But the cottage belonged to the above-mentioned Mrs. Mary Howard; and unless he paid rent to her, which was not to be expected in one of his years, sense, and standing, he must go.

The above-mentioned Mrs. Mary Howard — in legal parlance — was one thing; the beautiful lady seated on a roll of carpet was another. The law has terrors, for even a Wisdom. A lady who can sit on what 's not meant to be sat on has none! Especially considering her smile.

So Bilberry being disposed of, up comes Solomon Wisdom — very sad and subdued — in his new black.

Mrs. Howard suggested that he had been very devoted to his late master.

Wisdom, as befitted his name, laid great stress on the fact.

Mrs. Howard was afraid it would grieve Wisdom terribly to leave the place he loved so well.

He said it would, indeed. He clung to the cottage

where he had lived, the cottage where his children would have been born — if it had pleased the Almighty to give him such things — and where they would most assuredly have died.

The thought of the children touched Mrs. Howard, and she asked how old they were. She was a little uncertain about the children, whether they were alive or not. The old man spoke with such emotion that it was difficult to understand what he said.

Wisdom explained that there were n't any, — never had been any, — but for all that it did n't do to judge by appearances.

Mrs. Howard agreed that it was wise in many cases, but in this particular one, however, — what did it matter? The thought of children, non-existent, was sufficiently touching.

Perhaps she knew how precious dream children can be. They are never disappointing. They are always just what their parents would wish them to be. Has a dream child ever failed to pass an examination? Never. The dream mother would be sadly wanting in imagination who could allow such a thing. She would n't deserve to have dream children. The boys — supposing the father to have been at Eton — always captain the eleven. They always hit over the pavilion at Lords, every time! Supposing the dream mother to be of the heroic type, the boys are great soldiers — lead forlorn hopes, and win the Victoria Cross constantly. To another mother the field of politics is open. A great orator to some is a tempting dream, and it

leads to prime ministers by a gentle and easy if circuitous route. Dream children do noble things, think noble things, and are always beautiful to look upon, — combining to a wonderful degree the good points of both parents, supplemented by those things which each feels the other to lack.

All this is based on the supposition that the mother — the dream mother — be possessed of a hopeful disposition and a lively imagination.

It is doubtful whether Wisdom, being a bachelor, and rigid at that, knew of the joy of dream children. But he knew their value as an asset, just as he knew the value of honeysuckle creeping over the porch when dealing with soft-hearted London ladies. He knew the value of creepers generally, and he added what he thought a touch in the "hysteria" which peeped in at his bedroom window — provided the time of year was right.

Wisdom was very careful not to be caught tripping. Playing tricks with flowers was always dangerous.

Wisdom was provided for. That was the difficulty. If only he could have stayed on as butler, valet, parlour maid, or whatever he chose to call himself, it would have simplified things.

"If only, Wisdom, you could have stayed on! But you are provided for!"

"To a certain extent, ma'am."

Then a brilliant idea struck Mrs. Howard. Why should not Wisdom, like Bilberry, do as much as he thought fit?

"Wisdom, supposing you did stay, and supposing, taking your cottage into consideration, and the wages I now pay a parlour maid, you did as much as you thought you could do in justice to yourself — supplemented by a boy!"

Mrs. Howard was radiant; such a splendid idea! A butler in the country looked so well and added to the safety of lonely women in a house, supposing they should be left alone.

Wisdom, like Bilberry, promised to think it over.

"I think," said Mrs. Howard, "it is only fair to tell you that there are five children, our own two selves, six servants, not counting the supplementary boy, a governess — and dogs!"

"Five children — now!" mused Wisdom. "Are the women-folk young?"

"The servants? Well, no, not exactly. The nurse is middle-aged and active; the nursery maid is certainly young; the cook is middle-aged; the housemaid not quite, and then a girl between, young of course, almost too young to matter. But —"

"It 's the active one I fear, ma'am," said Wisdom.

"Oh, nurse? I promise you, you need have no fear. She disapproves of men."

"So they say, ma'am, as are the worst," said Wisdom. "But for my master's sake I should like to keep an eye on things. I don't like to think of everything going to rack and ruin without so much as a hand put out to stop it. I will think it over."

When Mrs. Howard told her husband, he wondered

if she had done wisely. She was wondering, too, by that time.

Wisdom in his turn wondered, too. He wondered what "supplemented" meant. By a boy, too! It might be hard to bear. But anything was better than turning out of a cottage and paying rent, when you need n't.

Then as to the gardener! To turn away Great-uncle William's gardener would be like tearing a mother from her child. He, of course, must stay. In this Mrs. Howard lived to applaud her wisdom. Not Solomon, but her own.

So the butler, gardener, decorator, and painter were all settled, and Mrs. Howard went back to London well satisfied with her future home. As she tucked the children up in bed that night, she told them wonderful tales of the country she was taking them to.

"A real, large garden, mother?" said one.

"A real, large garden."

"With flowers, and trees, and cabbages, and carrots, and forget-me-nots, and daisies in it?" said another.

"All those, darlings."

"And a roller and a wheelbarrow and a mowing-machine?"

"And a roller and a wheelbarrow and a mowing-machine."

"And strawberries and raspberries and gooseberries?"

"All those — in time! Go to sleep, darlings."

"And darlin' little birds?"

"And darling little birds. Good-night, good-night!"

"Mother, mother!"

"Good-night, good-night," called mother, far away down the passage.

"And lawns and paths?"

"And lawns and paths," cried a voice faintly, in the distance.

"And a pond with fishes in it?"

"Did you hear what mother said?" asked one voice.

"I fink she said 'a pond with fisses in it.' Anyhow it was longer than 'no.'"

"She 'd got past her door, so we could n't quite hear."

"A pond with fisses in it. How goworious!"

"Have you said your prayers? Shall we pray to God to make the country come quite soon? Jack, are you asleep? A pond with fishes in it!"

"O God, I thank thee for a pond with fishes in it and all thy other mercies. God bless those fishes and keep them safe till morning —"

"Longer than that — much, Silly," said another voice.

"Longer than that — much, please, I made a mistake — and God bless the moon and the stars and everybody."

He slept. They all three slept. Mrs. Howard crept back to see if they were all right. As she rearranged

Jack's bedclothes, he stirred in his sleep and said, "Go-wo-rious."

She went back to Peggy's room. "Can't you sleep, my darling?"

"I'm too happy to sleep. Mother, d' you suppose the day will ever come? Were there really flowers in the garden?"

"Really, Peggy."

"Just whisper, mother, very, very softly."

A moment later, "Truthfully?"

"Truthfully, my Peggy."

"Whisper — some — more."

Peggy slept.

V

In a day-dream, I picture the old house in Chelsea, where silence reigns. It is late on a summer's evening; but there is light enough to show up the marks on the walls where pictures had hung, on the boards where children's feet had trodden.

It all looks worn and sad and desolate. Sadder in its silence than it has ever been. It is quiet, where once was the sound of children's laughter. It is the ghost of a happy home.

When it is nearly dark, I see the door of the nursery open. An elderly woman walks across the room, and sniffs.

She it is who will let down the curtain, — the charwoman.

She opens each cupboard, and finding them bare, sniffs again. On the floor she finds a broken toy. She picks it up, looks at it, and says it will do for Johnnie.

But Johnnie, she knows, has turned his face to the wall, and refuses to be comforted. The lovely lady has given him lots of toys — real ones, not broken — but she has broken faith with him. She has gone forever, and has taken away his young ladies and gentlemen.

Johnnie cries himself to sleep.

The curtain goes down on the charwoman crying, with her apron over her head.

I draw up the blinds in the new house.

VI

I THINK one must have lived in a country village before one can realise what the excitement means when new people are coming. One must live really in the village; otherwise the news filters through various sources, and loses much of its authenticity. That, of course, at times tends to make it more exciting. But I am inclined to think that the best in us clings to fact rather than fiction, where the reputation of our neighbour is at stake.

Jane Somerset — once my maid, now my parlour maid — once Somerset, now Jane — I know pities those who by force of circumstances, combined with architectural construction, sit in lonely splendour in their mansions, gathering such news only as is compatible with the dignity of themselves and the respectfulness of their servants. Jane remembers that a maid's information comes through the butler, and she knows how a story loses by being repeated by a man. He either gives an exaggerated version, putting all the blame on the woman, or emphasises those points which, to a feminine mind, are unessential.

It is a carriage drive that largely puts one on another plane. To be of the village one must be in it.

The pulse of village life lies in its street. One cannot feel it from afar.

My cottage — Jane says it 's a house for all that —

stands close to the road. Jane can hear the news without appearing to do so. I am not sure that the most surprising news has not been whispered to her, as she dusts the boards of the room whose windows give on to the street.

Although my house looks on to the street, which is after all a road, it has a garden behind — such a garden! At least, I think it is. And it wanders of its own sweet will, guided by me and my small gardener — down to a stream where children, both grown-up and otherwise, come to fish while I look on and applaud.

Pat Howard comes constantly. He is a very nice person, and one day I said to him, after he had been fishing through the heat of the day, "Have you caught anything, Pat?"

And he cheerily answered, "No, I don't think my worm has seen a fish yet!"

Don't you think Pat must be rather nice? And would n't you be glad if he came and settled in your village?

You would know him if by chance he came, by his look of extreme friendliness. He would stop you in the road and ask you if you were married. If you said, "No," he would say, "Why?" In the same friendly way he would turn out his pockets for your inspection, and would show you his bruises — that only if he really liked you, and the bruises were handy.

When the Howards came to the village I was a fairly old inhabitant, old enough to be qualified to pull up blinds, for instance, keep Solomon Wisdom in

order, and do other things that Mrs. Durnford calls "taking upon yourself."

My excitement knew no bounds when the day arrived on which the new people were really to take up their residence.

The village had been in a state of delirious excitement, culminating in the arrival of a very large rocking-horse, the like of which had never been seen before.

It went unpacked through the village and required quite a large cart and a horse its very prototype to draw it.

I doubt whether the advent of the curate had been as exciting, when we were promoted to one on the Vicar's voice giving way.

The fact of the rocking-horse making its triumphant progress unpacked is only to be paralleled in the case of a king and queen driving in an open carriage instead of in a shut one. We all know the difference that makes, after a journey up from the country on purpose.

I own that my interest was centred in Mrs. Howard. The rocking-horse left me cold. I longed to see the woman of whom I had heard so much. I shall always remember my first sight of her. There was a radiance about her that is difficult to describe and impossible to imagine. I could never have imagined any one looking as she did after a journey with a lot of children and a vast amount of luggage.

I thought of her a great deal — to be accurate, of

nothing else for the rest of that day, and I planned in my mind when I should go and call. Would it appear too eager if I went at once? Could I go and offer to help?

I felt Mrs. Durnford's eye upon me!

I little imagined that Mrs. Howard would call upon me, and that she would find me scantily clothed with my hair down. It was unlucky, as I don't believe I have been so dressed or rather undressed before or since at twelve o'clock in the morning. I had been washing my hair, that accounts for my hair being down.

I was "trying on," that accounts for the other thing.

I was in my bedroom, and of course felt perfectly safe, when I heard a strange voice in the hall. Relying entirely on the wisdom of Jane, I stepped out of my petticoat.

I was about to try on another worth thirty-five shillings, which had cost me two! Most women will realise that I could n't wait till dressing-time to try that on. The petticoat had come from Paris, and was the result of buying a coupon and making four other friends do the same thing. I don't pretend to understand it. I gave ten shillings, and my friends, who were kind enough to buy coupons from me, gave me eight! So the end of it was that the petticoat cost me two shillings! How it is worth thirty-five I don't know. But it is! Jane says no French person ever gave a thing worth all that to any one for two shillings. She says it was plain as plain. There was

robbing somewhere, and the French were n't the ones to be robbed. However, there was the petticoat on the bed, and I was about to try it on — when in the doorway appeared a figure. Mrs. Howard held me by both hands.

I am, I believe, shy both by nature and habit, and if any one had told me that I — under the circumstances — could face a total stranger and retain any degree of dignity, I should have said that he or she lied.

This radiant being, however, seemed to pay no attention whatever to my costume. "I have come to you," she said earnestly, "in a difficulty. It is about bread! Two bakers, or rather bakeresses, have asked me to get bread from them. One is a widow and makes bread with a wide margin of black all round the slice. So bad for the children! The other makes fairly good bread, but she is not a widow. It is so difficult."

I agreed that it was. The whole village had felt it. Old Mrs. Marker was the only one who had got out of the difficulty in a diplomatic as well as a Christian manner.

"She has a total income of two-and-sixpence a week," I said, "and for reasons of digestion decided that she must go elsewhere for bread. But rather than take away all her custom from the widow, she gets her soap from her."

"The dear, dear thing," said Mrs. Howard. "How wonderful of her! That sort of thing makes one feel ashamed. I shall do as she did; thank you so much!"

I was never vain, Jane has seen to that; but I felt

my visitor had an unfair advantage. She talked away quite happily, and when she was going I said I was sorry I could not go downstairs with her. It was the only reference I made to my costume — and that was only a glance.

When she had gone I sat down and laughed till I cried.

It was no use pretending to be strangers after that. Jane's horror knew no bounds.

"She did n't see you like that, miss?"

"She did."

"Oh, miss, and our reputation up till now has had no stain on it, here."

"Do you think it is so serious, Jane?"

"Serious? You must remember, miss, that you 've walked on red cloth in your day, — and to come to this. What 's the use of me keeping up the dignity of the family if you do these things?"

"I 've got good legs, Jane, I 'm glad of that."

"You 'll need to be thankful for small mercies, soon, miss! Whatever will the villagers say?"

I had not the time to ask Jane why they should know. They must, of course, hear that Mrs. Howard came to see me. They would quite probably know that I was upstairs, but why should they know I was as I was?

It is not an exaggeration to say that the whole village thought of little else than church-time on the first Sunday, and the position of their respective pews in relation to that of the Howards.

Mrs. Garlic, for reasons connected I am almost certain with the trimming of her bonnet, had some time before asked me to change pews with her. "Your best hat *is* trimmed all round, is n't it, miss?" she said.

This change must have been a source of poignant regret when the Howards filed into their pew directly in front of me, that first Sunday.

My position was one which every one in the village could only think of with feelings of jealousy, and I fear some malice. It certainly was an advantageous one, and to think that a rose only had stood between Mrs. Garlic and that position!

How few people think of moving the rose — in more things in life than bonnets.

Well, first of all Mrs. Howard came in. She wore a green muslin dress, which was distracting to the congregation generally.

They had n't expected a green muslin! That was all.

Then came the children, then Mr. Howard. The nurse sat in a pew on the left and the children smiled at her every now and then. The villagers thought that showed nice feeling.

It took quite a long time for the children to arrange themselves. It was evident that there was a discussion as to who should sit next their mother. One small boy whispered to another, somewhat smaller, "Don't you remember, I said, bags I?"

The boy somewhat smaller did n't remember and he

would n't remember either, that I could see. There was further whispering and a certain amount of bribing. That I knew, because the smaller boy said, "To keep for m–y v–ery own?"

Then the bigger boy moved up. The smaller boy got pink and he swallowed. I knew just what he was feeling. Was the knife with no blade worth the sacrifice?

The length of Mrs. Howard's prayer made a very favourable impression on the more devout members of the congregation, if it occasioned a little impatience on the part of the others.

I thought she must have felt embarrassed when she discovered that Mr. Dare was waiting for her to finish her prayer before he began the service. But I have since discovered that she is not easily embarrassed.

I am inclined to introduce the village people as they sit in church, although it is accounted wrong to look about. Why do their Sunday clothes smell of apples, I wonder?

Those who don't go to church must be introduced elsewhere. Some of them are very nice.

Well, from my splendid position behind the Howards, I can see, of course, the Vicar's wife. It was Pat Howard who pointed out to me some time after that first Sunday that her dress did up behind on Sundays and in front on week days. He seemed to think it a matter of supreme interest and importance. He argued that by it you can tell a clergyman's wife.

"I can tell lots of things, by things," which cryptic

saying is a favourite of his. I find him most instructive, but like all instructors, a little difficult to follow.

He could n't imagine why Mrs. Dare was n't a mother if she was married. He thought people could n't be.

I had no suggestion to offer. "Don't you know everything?" he said. He was preparing to put on a worm at the moment of wondering. Needless to say I have left the church, for the moment, for the riverside.

Pat realised that the worm he was about to sacrifice was perhaps a mother. He let it go — in case — and rootled in his tin box till he found another which he knew was n't.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Quite easily, as easily as anything," he said grandly.

To return to church!

I can see the Vicar's wife, as I said before. If she were by chance a beauty, I should account myself lucky, as her profile is cut out in cameo-like clearness against the unwritten part of the ten commandments. But she is not a beauty, although she has a dear kind face which always wears an expression of shocked surprise.

What I love to see is the way she looks at her husband.

He has a message to give her which he has for no one else.

During his sermons her face is sublime in its look

of ecstatic happiness. It is possible that she may be thinking of other things. She is happy, then, to be thinking of something very delightful.

Thoughts do make a difference — which reminds me of Pat.

He was sick one day, and was put to bed and kept on milk for two days. Imagine Pat on a restricted diet! Not that he is greedy. When his mother went to see him, about the nineteenth hour, she found him with what Nannie calls a beautiful expression on his face.

"What are you thinking of, my darling?" she said.

"I'm thinking of what chocolate cake tastes like," said Pat.

I have wandered from church again.

I can see the choir. It is mixed, and therefore large. Every soprano demands her counterpart in bass to see her home on dark evenings. A blind man would not imagine the choir to be so large as it is, because it makes quite a small noise — considering. Mrs. Dare says it is shyness that prevents them singing. I should have supposed something else.

Then I can see Ebenezer Bilberry. He was chapel once; but being a man of conscience and having repapered and repainted the vicarage, he knew his duty.

Now I differ on one subject with our Vicar. And that is that there may be some good in chapel people. There is dear old Hezekiah down the back lane, for instance, with the light of another world in his face, be it shining through church or chapel windows. Then in

church there is dear old Betsy Marker, she who hesitated to take all her custom away from the shop. It was a kindly thought, and that again shows in her face.

She wears a mantle that was "well up in the teens" when it was new. That was many, many years ago. She suffers from a mysterious disease which she speaks of as "him" and "he." This very naturally led Mrs. Howard to take an interest in the husband and to feel a deep resentment against him, for being "worrytin of nights" and "terryfyin" at other times.

Old Betsy is ready with her information at most times, and does not wait for enquiries. But Mrs. Howard caught her unawares, drying an apron over a currant bush, and asked her straightaway how her husband was.

How Betsy laughed! "He 's been dead these many years!"

It was a terribly good joke, and was told all over the village. Through the window, no doubt, to Jane, and on to me.

Now I wander away from church!

In the pew behind Betsy sits the old farmer, beloved of us all. There must be something ennobling in the tilling of the soil, in the reaping of harvests, or the not reaping of harvests! To be a farmer and not complain of the weather argues a real and true devotion to the Creator of all things.

With Jane, the whole thing lay in a nutshell. Would the Howard household wear bonnets, or would they not?

Jane always speaks of "households" and of the "family being in residence" — even when she refers to me and my small establishment! As a matter of fact, the Pophams are the only people in the immediate neighbourhood who can live up to such expressions.

Jane was born for better things. The use of her surname, for instance, but that she gave up with the other things.

Whether they would wear bonnets or not! That was the question. It was a supreme test in the eyes of Jane.

They came out of it triumphant — in bonnets! If they had not worn bonnets Jane's authority with my younger servant would have suffered a severe shock. Jane had known they would. Maud had thought they would n't. It would not have been good for Maud to triumph.

It never is good, apparently, to be in the right before one is well over seventeen. I remember being right in such a vast number of things before I was seventeen, and in so few afterwards.

Jane has never quite forgiven Maud her name. She thinks I ought to have called her Emma, and have done with it. But Maud was in mourning for her mother when she came, and I did not like to suggest a change. Jane could not see why.

I said it was probably the mother who had chosen the name. But Jane said — knowing men as she did, and having seen a photograph of the father — she should say it was very unlikely.

However, I don't always do what Jane tells me.

Well, every one in church, with the exception of the dear old farmer and his wife, looked at the Howards; unless it entailed a complete turning round. And when one of the children climbed on to a high footstool as we sang "Thou Child shalt be called the Prophet of the Highest," they understood as little as I did its true significance. Pat explained later.

Betsy Marker, being very old, walked with difficulty, and Mrs. Howard took her arm and gently led her down the aisle. She gave her such a look — so Betsy said. That and the comfortable words made it a memorable day for the old woman, and the Howards entered into their kingdom with the good wishes of every one in the village.

"It is n't as that they have money to spend, seeing as we don't know that they have," said Mrs. Barley. "It 's the ways of them down to the smallest child. Master Pat — he 's made friends all round. He 's took wonderful to Zulus and almond rings."

It got about that Pat had opened an account in Zulus and almond rings. But Peggy said he had n't. He only would like to have! which, after all, is n't quite the same thing. It reminds me of the mother who found her child crying. "Has any one been unkind to you, darling? Tell mother!"

"Nope."

"Has any one said anything unkind to you?"

"Nope — but they would like to have."

VII

THE first time Pat visited me, he surprised me in the strawberry beds, which was clever of him.

It certainly robbed the situation of any stiffness there might have been, seeing that we had not been introduced.

The stiffness, if any, was in my back. The Americans have it that for a man properly to admire morning-glories, he must have a hinge in his back. I find the want of it more in the strawberry beds. Perhaps we have no morning-glories!

Pat found no difficulty whatever connected with picking strawberries.

"Well!" he said, smiling at me, standing with his legs apart and his hands in his pockets.

"Well, I'm very glad to see you!"

"I've seen you before," he said, "lots of times. So's Father."

"I've seen you before," I returned.

"Yes, I know, but not so many times as I've seen you."

"Perhaps not," I said. "You see, there are so many of you."

"Are there only one of you?"

"Only one!"

"It is a little to be. Haven't you a father and a mother?"

"No, not now."

"Did you ever?"

"Yes."

"Are you what 's called an orphan?"

"Yes, I am; are you sorry for me?"

"Yes, I am, but you were laughing just now."

"I often laugh."

"Do you? Are orphans supposed to laugh? Hyænas do — at least I think it was those that do, but not orphans — not specially. It was at the Zoo we heard them! P'r'aps they 're orphans, too."

"Yes, perhaps they are, Pat. Some of them are sure to be!"

"Is that why they laugh?" he said, puckering up his forehead.

I was getting decidedly mixed.

"Oh no, I don't think so."

"Why d' you laugh if you 're an orphan, then?"

I took a deep breath. "Well, you see, things get better, Pat, in time. Even the worst wounds heal." Whereupon Pat showed me one scar and one bruise. They lay side by side on his knee, which served to corroborate my statement, and he nodded wisely. "This," he said, pointing to the scar, "does n't hurt one single scrap."

He punched it by way of illustration.

"This one does like billyo!" He felt it gently, and drew a long whistle, inwards, then proceeded to make a poultice of leaves and grass, which he pressed on to the bruise.

"Kate tumbled downstairs one day!" he said.

I was going to say I was sorry, when he went on:

"The bear that goes up the pole is n't really the polar bear! Did you think it was?" he said, putting his head on one side.

"Well, I had n't thought of it exactly."

"Well, it is n't. The white bear is the polar bear. It goes in the water — not when you specially want it to. It 's by the camels and the other bears, too. But the bear that is n't the polar bear is by itself, in a sort of a well, and it eats buns — you put them on to the end of an umbrella — that 's best! It was Baby thought it was the polar bear. Baby has an awful lot to learn!"

"Thank you, Pat. I always wanted to know so much."

"Did you?" he said, looking at me earnestly. "Why did n't you ask, then? Father says we must always ask or else we shan't ever know. Baby thinks God paints the sunset with chalks. D' you know why? Well — it 's like this — because it 's rubbed out the next morning. Did you think that?"

"I am afraid I never thought anything so nice."

"Nice? But it is n't true! D' you know any true stories about lions and things? It does n't matter if you don't. Father does. One bit about the lion is n't quite true, but it is nearly. Is this your very own house?"

"Yes, my very own."

"Is it Jane's, too?"

"I should like Jane to think it hers."

"Why don't you tell her it 's hers, then? I like Jane."

"Yes, so do I."

"I like you."

"I like you, Pat."

"I like every one at our new house."

"And do you like your new house?"

"Yes — I love it."

"Did you like London?"

"For some things."

"What sort of things?"

"Buns — and flowers, and — water-carts."

"What other sort of things?" They seemed to me such funny things to like London for.

Pat looked at me reproachfully and said, "You do ask a lot of questions."

"Well, you see if you can eat a lot of strawberries."

He did.

"We 've got a pond with fish in it," he said, during a pause.

"I 've got a river with fish in it."

Pat's eyes grew wide with wonder.

"A river — like the Thames — which went past our house — at least — nearly past our house — in London?" this in a voice hushed with excitement.

"No, no; a tiny little river compared with the Thames."

"What 's 'compared'?"

"Well," I hesitated, "comparing one river with another is putting them side by side — so to speak — in your mind, and judging the size of the two rivers."

Pat's face became all puckers and perplexity.

"You could n't, because one 's here and one 's in London."

"Yes, I know."

"I don't think you explain very well!"

"No, I 'm afraid I don't. I 've been told that before."

"Who told you? A boy like me?"

"Not always; a big man sometimes, and a big woman sometimes."

"Then why does n't some one teach you to explain?"

"Well, it 's difficult."

"It is n't extra. Mother explains."

"How does she?"

"Well, she says something — see? Then she gives us a hug — and then she says 'you little goose.'"

"And do you understand then?"

Pat evaded this. "Mothers can do everything — except jump. I don't think they jump extra well. But they can do nearly all the other things."

Then softening towards a less fortunate member of the sex, he put his hand in mine and we went down to the river, where I gave him his first lesson in fishing. I am glad to know that now, and if for some time a worm as bait had a greater attraction than a fly, one can't blame Pat. The float has a fascination of its

own. Moreover, Pat bought it out of his own money. Any one who remembers their childhood in the smallest degree will remember what treasures that money could buy.

Pat was quick to see the fish, and he learned at once to be quiet. He took readily to stalking, and we spent a delightful time together. When I said, "Will you come again, Pat?" he said, "I can't come and see you without all the others knowing."

This seemed to reflect on me — I did not wish there to be anything secret in our friendship — and I hastily said there was no reason the others should n't know.

"I thought you only wanted me," he said wistfully. "Do you want all the others, too?"

I saw at once that I had made a mistake, and I told him that I wanted him to come all by himself.

He smiled. "The others may come when I want to go somewhere else. Shall I go and bring my brother Jack to see you?"

I saw the nobility of this and said, "Do, I should love to see Jack."

"All right," he said. "What 's your name?"

"Christian Hope."

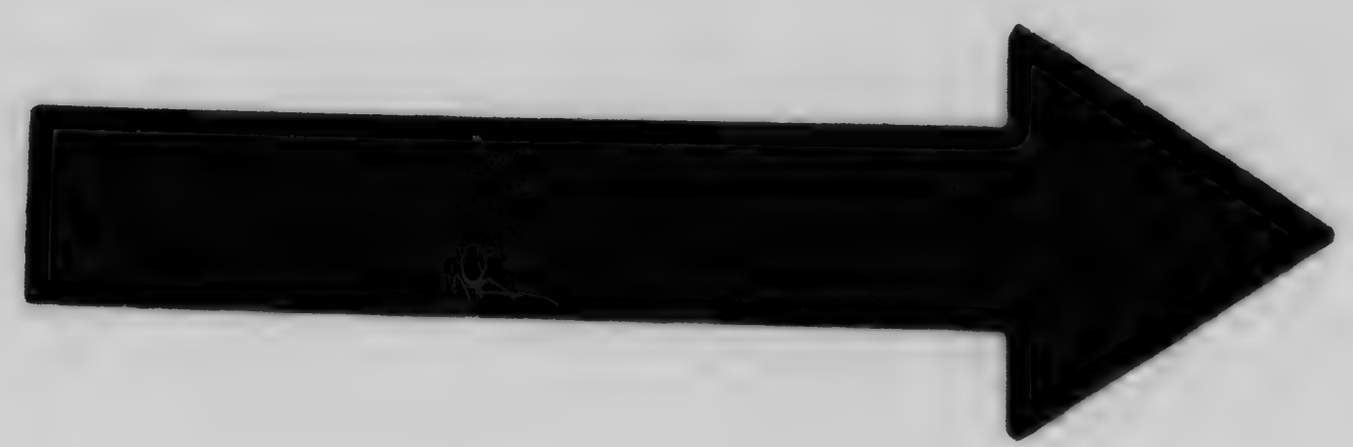
"What a rummy name! Mrs.?"

"No, Miss."

"Are n't you married, then? Father says you ought to be. — Are you?"

"No."

"Then why do you have a house of your very own?"



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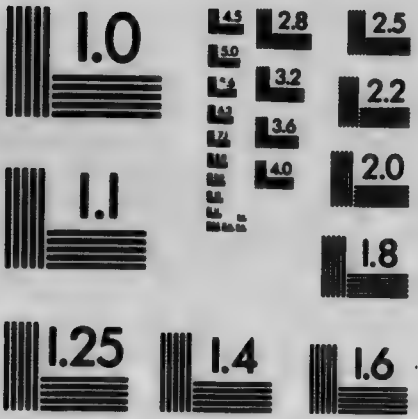

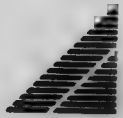

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"The easier to have you to tea, my dear!"

"That 's little Red Riding Hood, I know! Good-bye! It was when the wolf was in bed and Red Riding Hood did n't know he was, and she said all those sort of things. What big eyes you 've got, and all the other things — you know! I knew it was little Red Riding Hood you meant!" This was called from the garden gate.

"Quite right, Pat."

He went off whistling, I back to the garden to wonder what Mr. Howard meant by saying I ought to be married. Had he used those words? There was opprobrium in the term "ought."

How extraordinarily ready some men are to think women are necessarily unhappy unless married.

I had forgotten all about "brother Jack" when Pat reappeared leading a very hot child by the hand. They had evidently been running. "This is Jack," said Pat, "but he 's hot!"

There have been moments in my life when I, too, might very justly have been introduced in the same way.

Except for the one memorable interview, I had not seen Mrs. Howard. I went up the afternoon following Pat's visit to pay my respects. I knew they were not settled, and Jane said I ought not to go.

I was shown into the drawing-room — I thought by Nannie, but as she wore an untrimmed bonnet shape on her head, I could not trust myself to look long enough to make sure. I felt it counterbalanced to

some slight degree my costume of the other morning. If I had no business to be so attired in the privacy of my bedroom, Nannie had certainly no right to be found in a buckram bonnet shape in the afternoon — or opening the door at all, I suspected!

This was evidence of the activity dreaded by Wisdom!

As she left the room she clasped her head, so that she knew in part what I had suffered. She had, at least, the excuse of not being settled.

I stood and looked at the room in which I had sat so many hours with old Mr. Wallace. It was changed. The furniture was the same, but the dark yellow morocco had given way to chintzes, and where there could be flowers there were flowers, bowls of roses, bowls of mignonette, and bowls of lavender. It was evidence of a Londoner running riot.

There were toys on the floor, and a railway in course of construction ran down one side of the room.

I was examining it carefully when a small voice said, "You must n't touch!"

I knew that. On a piece of foolscap paper was written in large letters, "Please do not touch!" It was so placed that all could read who dared to approach. "On pane of deth" was added in red.

"It 's Pat's velly, velly own," continued the voice.

I looked round and down, down, down, till within about two feet something from the ground I lost myself in the depths of a pair of the bluest eyes in the world. They belonged to a baby.

She was in white; round her waist were blue woollen reins. She replaced her bit — which happened to be a coral necklace — and made a noise like a horse.

Nothing embarrasses me more than being left alone with a baby. But this one made me feel quite at home. She seemed such a very pleasant person. I was full of courage and said gaily, "Will you give me a kiss?"

"Nope," she said kindly but firmly. "Horses can kick," she announced very solemnly. It was nice of her to give me fair warning. In a large family children learn to play the game, there is no doubt about that.

"You would n't kick me?" I said.

She nodded as much as to say, "Would n't I?"

She proceeded to toss her hair over her face and looked at me through her curls. I knew enough about children and horses to recognize a mane when I saw it.

"What 's your name?" I asked.

"Bthrucemawycawdahowd and Baby," she announced.

"I mean the gee gee's name," I said faintly.

"Bthrucemawycawdahowd," she repeated, a little impatiently.

"You won't bite?" I said, with the hope that I might change the subject.

"You won't, will you?"

The answer was far from reassuring, and I pretended to be very much frightened. But it was n't the right kind of pretence, evidently, not the sort she was accustomed to. She looked rather pityingly at me, then walked

away. She stood looking at the railway, deep in thought, then with grave deliberation she put out her foot and squashed the signal — flat. She looked round at me, shrugged her shoulders, and laughed, as much as to say, "Who says I'm afraid?"

At that moment a little girl came into the room and Baby proceeded to engage me in deep conversation. "Brown coats don't have pockets," she announced very solemnly.

Whether it was a matter for pride, resentment, or just plain unmitigated sorrow, I don't know.

"Stools don't have to be patted," she said; "they're not real, they're not dolls."

I said nothing.

"Dapple greys don't have carts," she continued very seriously, as if hoping by emphasis to instil into my very stupid brain the ordinary facts of every-day life. "They have reins."

I thought the safest way out of the difficulty was to smile, which I did. I am sure the baby knew the smile was put on to hide my ignorance. Peggy certainly gauged it and said, "You see, Baby has got a dapple grey horse, but it has n't got a cart. Her godmother gave it to her on her birthday. It 's got harness."

I thought how foolish it was of the godmother to have started Baby in life with the erroneous impression that dapple greys don't have carts, when for a few shillings they might have them. Because godmothers owe their position to others, they seem to think they can do what they like, whereas every parent is

prepared to instruct godparents in their duty, if only they would ask. I know a godmother who said to a child who chanced to be her godchild, "Who gave you that locket?"

"Well, you didunt!"

So that shows that children understand more than people think and that parents talk more than godparents suppose.

Baby was a delightful person and could be as solemn as only the nicest babies know how. A smile was always held in readiness. But it was not wasted. She had apparently one very deeply rooted objection, and that was to being kissed. Nevertheless she was kissed every time any one came into the room or went out. She was forever smoothing her ruffled garments and saying, "It is a bovver bein' kissed."

By way of soothing her I admired her frock. This pleased the woman in her very much, and she turned round so that I might see it from every point of view. She was very proud. Jack thought too proud, I expect, or else why did he say, "It w-as a n-ight-dress once!"

Women feel these things at the hands of their menkind, even at Baby's age.

I wondered if she was to escape the penalty for squashing the signal. I hoped so. But I hoped in vain. Pat came into the room and made straight for the railway. "Who squashed the signal? Jack, was it you?"

Jack looked sublimely innocent. Is there ever a

moment more joyful in a child's life than when he can say, truthfully, that he has n't done a thing? It comes so seldom.

Baby looked so conscious that, of course, she was suspected, convicted, and sentenced all in a breath. Nannie, who had appeared on the scene, pleaded that Baby was young and would never do it again. But Baby would n't make any promises.

Finally Nannie said, "Now, Baby, never let me see you touch that railway again!"

"No," said Baby, "I 'll let Lucy see me."

Lucy was an indulgent nursery maid.

"There!" said Pat.

VIII

I WAS looked upon by many of my neighbours as a privileged person, having, so to speak, made great advances in my friendship with the Howards.

Mrs. Durnford wanted to know how I did it, and came for that purpose and one other, I knew. Seeing that she was a little jealous, I thought to appease her by telling her that it had n't been quite as I could have wished. I told her of Mrs. Howard's visit to me. Instead of sympathising with me she seemed inclined to censure, and went off on a side issue.

"Why *do* you go about in your petticoat in the morning? I never do."

That is the worst of Mrs. Durnford. Here she was forever with the deep-rooted idea that I had lived in my petticoat all the morning and every morning.

However, it served its purpose, and kept her away from the subject of my sudden friendship with the Howards, in t[illegible] wonder as to how Mrs. Howard could hav[illegible] to further the acquaintance of a woman so s[illegible] her habits.

"I should h[illegible] thought it was the very thing to put a person off. Why, I heard of a man who lost interest in a girl just because she went out in thin shoes on a wet day. That 's a small thing compared to you. But everybody seems to think they are odd sort of people, don't they? My cook tells me that the

family met the savoury in the hall the other evening after dinner, and that they went back into the dining-room to eat it. That was odd, was n't it?"

I did n't quite understand, but I said I thought they were very delightful people.

"Yes, but it shows they had no dessert. But there — that does n't always follow. Some people think you are a little odd, don't they? At least, they did. I always stuck up for you! The doctor says you ought to be married. Well, well, that 's your business, not ours! Lady Victoria has called, I hear."

"Yes, I expect so."

"Did Mrs. Howard tell you so?"

"Oh, no, why should she?"

"I don't know, she might. If she had, you could have told her it was purely political, could n't you?"

"Hardly, because you see they are old friends."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Durnford, in the tone of voice as much as to say, "I should have been told of this!"

"Indeed!" she repeated.

She pulled off her gloves, stretched them, patted them, and pressed them on her knee. While pulling out the fingers, she said, "Mr. Howard writes, I believe?"

"Yes, I think he does."

"You know! What does he write? Novels?"

"No, not novels. He writes leaders and articles, and edits a magazine, a serious one, I think!"

Mrs. Durnford is known to disapprove of literary

people, and it is her proud boast that she never reads novels.

"I can see life as it is, without its being made ridiculous by people who know nothing about it."

"In what way do you think they so misrepresent life?"

I knew, but it is as well to let the dear woman talk.

"In describing love, my dear. You have never experienced love. The doctor says you have the eyes of an enquiring child. He does not mean that you look stupid. You may have had proposals, of course. They say any woman can who sets her mind to it. If you have you will know that not one man in fifty kneels. I should n't have respected Dr. Durnford's intelligence if he had. Besides, it was on the road. Now take proposals in books! Pages and pages, chapters sometimes, whereas the real thing happens like this. Dr. Durnford met me at the corner of the road, by the sign-post, and he asked me what I was going to do, and I said I was going for a walk. And he said, very naturally I thought, 'May I come, t[illegible]' I bowed. Then he said nothing till we got to L[illegible]s Pond, and then he said, 'May I walk with you through life?' I said, 'Yes.' That was all. He gave me the ring; it was in his pocket. Diamonds and sapphires, small but large enough."

"But how did you know," I said, "that he did n't mean just walking, like some people do for years?"

"Because we were n't in that [illegible]tation!"

I felt I had blundered, but she went on.

"What could be simpler? No misunderstandings, no pasts, on either side. I said, 'Is there anything I should know?' realising the difference between men and women — though not countenancing it — mind you! And he said, 'Nothing.' He didn't insult me by asking questions.

"We had an oak suite in the dining-room, a mahogany suite in the consulting-room, a satin-wood suite in the drawing-room, and ash in the bedroom. We had good carpets throughout, changing on the stairs from pile to cord at my bedroom. They are all as good to-day as they were then."

I said I thought she had chosen most wisely, both in husbands and furniture.

"You see, Miss Hope, what I object to in writing is this! You set about to write a book — which Heaven forbid! You write about me! Well, you haven't the least idea what I am thinking about! You say, 'Mrs. Durnford was very much touched when I told her about old Mr. Tubb's death. Her eyes filled with tears.' Well, they didn't. I wanted to sneeze, that was all! See?"

"Well, that would be called a literary license. I am sure you would feel the death of a Mr. Tubb dreadfully; I can imagine any one would," I said.

"I only just happened to think of the name. I don't suppose a name makes any difference."

There is another side to Mrs. Durnford's character.

"I saw Pilly Wurzle to-day," I said.

The wind of controversy died down and a peace stole over the mind of Mrs. Durnford.

"Did you," she said. "Poor little boy! I must go and see him. Was he suffering less? I have promised to sit up with him to-night. His mother and I take it in turns. It is pitiful to see a child suffer!"

"How many nights have you sat up with him?"

"Oh, I forget!" she said. "Nothing soothes a child like being held. There seems some virtue in the arms themselves."

I knew how many nights she had sat up. She was not what is called a social success but ask the suffering man, woman, or child. I guessed the day would come when she and Mrs. Howard would be great friends — even if their ideas on love and life generally were different. The romance of Mary Howard's life had not touched plain Elizabeth Durnford. But there was no hand gentler than hers in soothing pain, no heart kinder — except on things social. There was the rub. She owned to me that when she called she never knew when to go, and that it was impossible for her to walk out of a room gracefully when she knew her hostess was watching her. Then if she lunched out she had to wait to see what other people used in the way of knives or forks, before she dared begin. Then again, she never knew whether it was only not expedient or not permissible to spread her handkerchief on her lap at tea! But she had saved many a dress from spotting — in the muffin season especially — by that simple precaution.

"Dear Mrs. Durnford," I said, "don't think of those things! Be your own natural self."

"That 's all very well if your own natural self is a lady and knows when to go and what to eat with."

By way of comforting her I said I had once eaten a ham ice with a spoon.

"Did you get hot all over?" she asked.

"Well, no, the ice was too cold to allow of that. If ever I want a lesson on how to behave — when the kettle won't boil — and that sort of thing, I go to see Mrs. Brook. As a rule her kettle does boil, but if it should not — then I get my lesson!"

"But she is n't a lady!" said Mrs. Durnford.

I put my head on one side and pondered.

Lady Victoria Popham had never called on Mrs. Durnford.

"Shall I call on Mrs. Howard?" she said suddenly.

"Call? Of course. She will be very offended if you don't."

"Offended? — With me?"

"If she could be such a thing. She is certainly unlike other people, and to this day I don't know whether she noticed that I had on no petticoat or not!"

"No petticoat! I thought you were *in* your petticoat!"

I had made a bad slip. But it was as well to get Mrs. Durnford back to the subject. Having exhausted it she rose to go.

"Miss Hope," she said, getting very red, "I will

tell you why I feel these things. I think it is much better to be aboveboard and keep nothing back. Dr. Durnford says I 'm silly to mind, but I want to get accustomed to things before my daughter comes out. When I went to call on Lady Lucas she was so agreeable that I felt quite at my ease, and she said, 'You 'll stay to tea, won't you, Mrs. Durnford?' I said I would. I was quite pleased to do so. The daughter jumped up, at a look from her mother — I saw that, — and rang the bell. She said to the man who came, 'Bring tea.' It was half-past three! You understand, don't you?"

"I think it was Lady Lucas who ought to — however, don't bother about such things. Go to tea with Mrs. Brook if you really want to know how to be —"

"But, as I said before — but I suppose you are being funny. I never was good at seeing a joke. Are you coming down the village? That 's right."

I hung a horseshoe on the handle of the door.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"It 's to let the Howard children know I 'm out."

"Could n't Jane tell them?"

"She will, no doubt; but Pat likes to know before he gets to the house."

IX

I COULD not resist dropping in to see Betsy Marker and hearing her opinion of the new-comers.

I found the dear old thing waiting to catch any passer-by, and she smiled brightly as she welcomed me.

"It 's you, to be sure, miss. Come in, come in. I should know you anywhere! I always say so."

She dusted a chair with her apron and motioned me to sit on it; — which I said I would do provided she would sit on the other. It was her custom to demur, mine to insist. We both bowed to custom and to each other. She then sat down and rubbed her hands together. "Well, miss!"

"Well, have you seen them, Betsy?"

"Every one of 'em, miss. Are n't they beauties? And the lady? I thought, miss, as how I had woke up in Heaven after hearin' those 'comfortable words' and seein' her face all smilin' at me. All down the church on her arm! I could feel as it was silk underneath. Deary me, it was a day for Betsy! You could tell, miss, as how she was converted and a Christian, could n't you?"

"Can you be one and not the other, Betsy?"

"Deary me, miss, you don't suppose they go together naturalwise like, do you? Take the Vicar; he 's a Christian if ever there was one, but he 's not con-

verted, is he? You can tell that by sermons, can't you, miss? Take my old man — he was converted sure enough. He knew the very hour he was took. It was sudden like; and he did n't take to his food — not properly — for two days after. But he was no Christian, miss. There was no — bearin' all things — forgivin' all things — hopin' all things — about him."

She clasped her hands and said the words reverently.

"He never hoped for nothin' — in this world; he was never one to bear things — and he never forgave anything — to my knowing. But he could speak beautiful — and he was patient with me when our babies died — I could n't seem to feed 'em right, miss. It was no good — they just faded like pretty flowers!" The old voice broke and the old hands fidgeted with her apron.

"Dear, dear Betsy," I said, "it 's years ago! Don't think of that part of it."

"Some things don't seem to count in years, miss."

"No, Betsy dear, I know! How is 'he'?"

"Oh, worryin' at nights, miss, but the Lord is merciful, very merciful; I might have worse to bear than he."

Having heard Betsy Marker's opinion and Mrs. Durnford's, I could not resist going round by the vicarage to hear what Mrs. Dare thought about the Howards.

She was delighted with them — so far.

"It is early to judge, dear, but Edward thinks Mrs.

Howard is very beautiful. His mother collected photographs of beauties, and he does n't remember any face among them as beautiful as Mrs. Howard's. There were some of an undesirable character — which, of course, his mother was not aware of — a cousin from London enlightened Edward. He burned them as soon as he knew. But even among those — he just glanced at them to make sure he was burning the right ones — he does not remember any so beautiful as Mrs. Howard. They very naturally had not her expression. Mr. Howard is so handsome too, and the children! Mrs. Howard was very kind, and asked if there was any work she could do. I thanked her very much and said we had hangings for all the seasons of the church's year. Since Lady Victoria has given Edward a new pair of bags there really seems to be nothing."

It occurred to me to say that I thought Mrs. Howard perhaps meant other sort of work, but I did n't.

"Betsy Marker," I said, "is in the seventh heaven."

"Yes, she tried to tell me a long story about Mrs. Howard leading her down the aisle, and I just told her very gently that in God's house she must n't allow her mind to be distracted. I wish we could get the people to be more reverent."

"I sometimes think Betsy —"

"Think what, dear?" said Mrs. Dare.

"That Betsy is getting rather feeble," I said lamely.

"Yes, dear, I suppose she is. I send her soup twice a week and a pudding on Sundays. The only stipulation I make is that the dishes should be returned clean.

I had to send one back last week; it was n't thoroughly washed."

A lump rose in my throat. Dear old Betsy, with her kind, blind old eyes, and Mrs. Dare with her dear, kind, blind heart!

"It was a dish with ups and downs in it round the edge, miss," pleaded Betsy, one day later when she told me the story of the returned dish. It rankled evidently.

"It was difficult to clean, miss, specially in the downs. I put the cloth carefully in the crinklies, but I dare say I missed some — my eyes not bein' what they were. I was counted a good washer-up once, miss.

"I could n't so much as reach the plate-rack for years after I began washing up at Great Popham. Mrs. Dare should have seen my plates then."

"I know, Betsy, and Mrs. Dare is so kind."

"So she be, so she be, real kind is Mrs. Dare. She does kind things, but it 's the little words that help such a deal — comfortable words." She folded her hands as if in prayer.

"Shall I read you some comfortable words, Betsy?"

"If it 's not too dark, miss."

"It 's not dark!"

"Not dark, miss? It seems rather darksome!"

"Well, it is rather," I said hastily. "Shall I say something by heart?"

"Please, miss."

I said some verses from the fourteenth chapter of St. John.

"Good-night, Betsy."

"Good-night, miss. It's not troubled now."

I went out into the sunshine that was becoming rather darksome to Betsy; and if prayer is an unuttered thought, I prayed then from the bottom of my heart that, if ever it came to me that sunshine and darkness should be as one, I might have burning within me the wonderful light that lightened the darkness of dear old Betsy and guided her footsteps into the way of peace.

X

PAT found me weeding one day. He doesn't stay long on such occasions, having no use for weeding, but he had something of great importance to impart.

"I've got a new discovery," this in a voice triumphant.

I spared the daisy root and rose from all fours to listen.

"Have you?" I said.

"Yes, I can tell you how old you are, in a jiffy — at least, it takes a little time. Mr. Gray showed us."

Now I think that the age of a woman who can still weed on all fours should hardly be made the subject of speculation.

"You say," continued Pat, "when you were born — see? Then I 'stract this year from that and then I add something — I forget what — and then that's it."

"But if I begin by telling you the year I was born, you see, Pat, there's nothing left for you to do!"

"There's the 'stractin', which is frightfully hard, worse than adding up, much. Perhaps I haven't remembered right!"

"Look, Pat," I said, seeking to comfort him, — since none of us like to catch our memories tripping, — "there's a robin with a thrush's breast. Isn't it funny?"

"Not so very," he said. "It 's quite easy. I spec a thrush sat on a robin's egg. I know a lot about nat'ral history. Mother gave me the hugest book at Christmas! I think I know all about nat'ral history — or nearly all. D' you know about earwigs?"

"No, except that I hate them in my sponge. Don't you?"

"No, not extra, then I 'm a boy. Girls don't like heaps of things boys don't mind. Are you a girl?"

"Well — not quite."

"I only wondered," said Pat. "It does n't matter if you are n't — does it?"

"Not in the least!" I said cheerfully. "Is there anything else about earwigs?"

"Heaps," said Pat; "they are very kind to their cee-springs."

"Oh," I said, "cee-springs?"

"Well, children, then," said Pat.

"I did n't know that, Pat. I never thought of earwigs as parents."

"Well, no [illegible]re they are! They 're mothers."

"Well, mo[illegible]ers, then; but if they are kind to their off-spring, it makes a great difference."

Pat puckered up his forehead, wrinkled up his nose, and said softly, "off-spring."

Then I felt ashamed, for even if we go back only so far as to Marcus Aurelius to learn manners, we find that he speaks with deference of Alexander, the grammarian, who taught him to refrain from fault-finding, and not in a reproachful way to chide those

who uttered any barbarous solecistic or strange sounding expression, but dexterously to introduce the very expression which ought to have been used.

Now I felt that I had not dexterously introduced the word "off-spring." Because a correction to be really polite should pass unnoticed, and here was Pat's nose all wrinkled up.

"Tell me some more, Pat."

"I have n't so very much time to-day."

"What are you going to do?"

"I 'm goin' visitin'."

"Where are you going?"

"Well, to Mrs. Brook for one thing. She is n't well, so I 'm just goin' to tell her things. They have early tea, and then I see all sorts of things, — cows, and pigs, and ducks, and chickens, — and Mr. Brook lets me pat the cows, but not milk them — because I can't yet, but I 'm goin' to learn. Can you?"

"No, Pat, I 'm not much use at milking cows."

"I did n't suppose you would be."

I wondered why.

"Then they play the harmonium, and we sing 'By and By.'"

"What d' you buy?"

"It is n't buying anything. Don't you know they 're holy words? It 's a hymn — 'In the Sweet By and By.' It means when you 're in Heaven — I think it does."

I felt I had not been a social success that afternoon. Pat was a little cold in his good-bye.

It was that same day, I think, that Peggy came to see me.

I have found it expedient to leave my door on the latch since the Howard children came to the village. It is curious how I listen for the click that proclaims the door open. I had never imagined myself to be of so sociable a nature.

I had laid aside my spud for my pen when Peggy found me.

She came up to my writing-table in a shy little way she has which is very attractive, and said, "I 've brought it."

"Brought what, darling?"

"What I promised."

I am not so accustomed to children that a thing of that sort does n't petrify me with horror. Had I forgotten? No, I mercifully remembered. "Your father's book?" I said.

I laid down my pen and put my arm round the child. She drew a book from under her pinafore, and laid it on the table — open.

With a small finger she pointed to a passage, and I read. After a moment Peggy said politely, — "It goes slower."

I began again: "She had the grace of some woodland animal, and the poise of her head was beyond the power of dancing master to teach. Her eyes were blue and set far apart. Imprisoned in them at times were sunbeams, at others lurking in their depths were the shadows that creep over Irish hills — soft, mys-

terious shadows. Her hair was dark and grew low on her brow, which was wide and gave her that look of calm nobility which was one of her greatest beauties."

"That was mother," said Peggy. "When father sees that book, he rushes at us like anything, and he says we are to give it to him. But we don't, because he wants to burn it, and it is our favourite book, — at least, the bit about mother is. The rest is a novel, but not a proper novel. Mother says it is very funny, and she laughs like anything when she reads it. But father does n't, because he is ashamed."

"He wishes he had never written it," I suggested.

"Yes, how did you know?"

"Because I think most people do when they have written a novel."

"Why, they need n't write them if they don't want to, need they?"

"You 'd think not, Peggy, but something seems to compel them to; then when the madness is over, and they look calmly and judicially at the folly they have perpetrated —"

"Mother never uses such very long words. Father does sometimes, but only when he forgets."

I said how sorry I was, and vowed in my heart never again to use "father" words.

I met Pat on his way back from the farm, and I asked him how Mrs. Brook was.

"She 's better," he said, "but she is n't quite well yet, because she still wears her Sunday clothes."

XI

THE first time I came face to face with Mr. Howard's optimism was when I went up to tell him that old Burridge's donkeys were always dying, and that not only had no one ever seen a dead donkey in general, but that no one had certainly ever seen Burridge's dead donkey in particular!

I heard that Mr. Howard had put down a sovereign towards a new donkey, no doubt moved by compassion on hearing the old scoundrel's story. Burridge, though picturesque and plausible enough, was an old villain. He had probably heard of the transactions between the Howards and Bilberry and Solomon Wisdom, and hoped for like mercy. No donkey — no chance of tinkering — no hopes of selling pots and pans! I can believe Burridge made a good story out of it. I am sure Mr. Howard made a better afterwards — at my expense.

Burridge's was at Mr. Howard's expense!

I found him in the garden reading an article he had just written, to Wisdom. I was told this afterwards. Judging by the expression of bewilderment on Wisdom's face, I could not have guessed what was happening. He had a leather in one hand and a silver spoon in the other. So he had evidently been called upon in an emergency.

I hesitated to broach the subject of my errand, but

Mr. Howard seemed delighted to see me. So was Wisdom, judging by the alacrity with which he obeyed the motion of Mr. Howard's hand.

"Thank you, Wisdom, much obliged to you."

I then said I understood old Burridge had been to him with a story of a dead donkey.

"Yes, poor old chap, he has."

"He has told that story before."

"You mean his donkeys have died before?"

"Well, no. You see," I said, "I don't believe the donkey is dead. So many donkeys die, all grey ones, and a new donkey appears just like the last, grey; and of course, Mr. Howard, if you go on giving a sovereign every time, they — the donkeys — will die all the faster. I only felt it my duty to warn you! I hope I —"

"Of course not; but, my dear Miss Hope, what has been your experience of human nature? What has struck you most? Its extraordinary goodness! I can see it in your face. Yours is a face that goes with a character too noble to misjudge. To doubt old Burridge is the suggestion of others. Poor old chap, why should he go to the trouble of inventing dead donkeys?"

"But getting four pounds for every dead donkey which is really alive, means four pounds in his pocket!" I said faintly.

"Well, let's look at it in another way. Let the donkey speak for itself. You watch the next new donkey! It must be due in a few days. If he stops at all the same public-houses as did the late donkey —

deceased — then I will believe you. Burridge is a rogue. But I think the donkey died! Poor old Burridge!"

I was not sure whether he was serious or not. The public-house test was a good one, unless of course the succeeding donkey had come from a neighbour of Burridge's with similar tastes.

"Good-bye, good-bye! Believe in Burridge to please me. He 's a good old man!"

I started to go.

"One moment," he said. "You say all grey donkeys are alike! You know, to an Englishman all Chinamen — it is said — are alike, yet a Chinese mother would undoubtedly know her son among several others."

I beat a hasty retreat. I had no weapons with which to meet a man who believed in the goodness of Burridge and no knowledge of Chinese physiognomy.

I had not gone far when Mr. Howard again called me.

"Miss Hope, would you be so very kind as to listen to this? Wisdom is busy and so is my wife. I won't keep you long. I want you to tell me if I have made my point clear. Wisdom is an excellent critic, in the sense that he brings to bear on a subject a singularly unbiassed mind, except on the subject of women. There he is not to be trusted. But in this article there is no mention of women. It is on 'The relative proportion of forces in nature as for and against spontaneous combustion.'"

The title was something like that. Poor Wisdom, what he must have felt! It would be easy to bring an unbiassed mind to bear on such a subject. I felt for the girl who — finding herself as hostess sitting at dinner next an American professor whose subject was fungi — tried to talk on the subject, having carefully read it up. After a time the professor said, very kindly, I am sure, "I guess you won't die of what you know about fungi."

I imagined that neither Wisdom nor I would die of what we knew about the relative proportion of forces in nature as for and against spontaneous combustion.

What I did know a few days later was that Burridge drove a grey donkey through the village, and the donkey almost looked the other way, so little interest did he exhibit in the signboard of "The Tinker's Rest."

Had the other grey donkey really died? He who had never passed any rest of a public kind without stopping? Presumably, or is that circumstantial evidence and not to be relied upon?

There was a twinkle in Mr. Howard's eye the next time we met, which I sought to evade. When I came to know him better, I met it bravely whensoever the necessity arose, which was often.

XII

THERE are social duties which the longer we leave them undone, the heavier they weigh on our consciences. My visit to the old Miss Franklyns was of this nature. I knew that as two little dogs watch the crack at the bottom of the door, so would they be watching for me to arrive laden with news of the Howards.

The difficulty was, how to get to them, the day being hot, and my bicycle having a hopelessly punctured tire. The alternatives were walking, or driving in the donkey cart. I sought Jane's advice. It is very much the same thing as tossing. I invariably go the very opposite to what she advises. But it is rather a comfort to get advice and to know that there is an exact opposite to it.

"Well, miss, as regards time, there is a difference. You would certainly walk faster than Ruth. On the other hand there is the sitting down, which is a comfort."

"My sitting down, or Ruth's?" I asked.

"Yours, miss. It 's something to be able to sit down in this weather. I often think what it would be like to be made to stand like horses. There 's much to be thankful for in that. I often think of it when I sit down."

"That 's very nice of you, Jane."

"Not at all, miss. It 's the way I 'm made."

"But as regards sitting down! You see, I stand up to urge Ruth on, and I walk up all the hills and down most."

"You always have spoiled Ruth, miss. It 's a pity; it 's hard on her, too. She 's not a favourite in the village, and it really is n't her fault. But this thing about going to Miss Franklyn. It 's the look of the thing really. Anyhow it 's called driving, however slow Ruth goes. I can say with truth that you 're out driving, if any one should call. Besides, there 's the coal-scuttle to be called for."

That settled it. Ruth and I went off to call on the Miss Franklyns.

I know that it is tiresome that in every story of a village there should be two maiden ladies. But as they exist and must live somewhere, what can one do? We may all come to it some day. We must if we don't marry; it is inevitable. I, for one, cannot live in a town.

It is also tedious that one old lady should invariably be as dour as the other is soft. But that again comes naturally enough. Two strong natures cannot live together. One must give in.

Maiden ladies living alone have invariably lost money. Of course, because the men of the family have invariably spent it.

I can plead no extenuating circumstances in introducing the Miss Franklyns. Miss Agatha is stern; Miss Dorinda is gentle. They once lived in a large

house; they now live in a small one. I don't pity them on that account, knowing as I do the joys of a small house. But Miss Agatha found joy in architectural dimensions, and she holds that a lady — to be at her best — should live in a drawing-room forty feet long. It gives her scope.

As children, girls, and young women they had lived in a drawing-room fully as large as that, and they had been rich and had had everything that their rather restricted world could give them. Knowing no other, they were happy. Then their father died, and instead of dying a rich man it was found that he was very poor, having gambled away everything. People wondered how he could have done it; he had been such a proud man. They had credited him with a pride that sees beyond death, and takes a posthumous pleasure in the effect a large will makes upon people in general.

He was less proud than people had thought, and there the matter ended. So people supposed, so far as the daughters were concerned. It was no fault of theirs, and no one would hold them responsible. Hands of sympathy were extended to them, doors were thrown open to them, and every one supposed that the hands would be taken and the doors entered. But no. Miss Agatha developed a character hitherto unsuspected. She rose from her sorrow full of this determination. Where her father had been — misled, she would repay, — to the uttermost farthing. Poor little Miss Dorinda, quelled by the spirit of her sister, had very

little to say in the matter. On one or two subjects she had very strong opinions. Particularly on one, — the very great indelicacy of a bathroom. It was a thing she could hardly bring herself to mention. Otherwise she was easily influenced. Beside her bed, on a table, stood a money-box, and on it was written, "I will repay."

"Whenever you feel inclined to spend money, Dorinda, look at the money-box."

As it was the last thing at night and the first thing in the morning Miss Dorinda saw, she was not likely to forget it. It was emptied at stated intervals by Miss Agatha.

Miss Dorinda, unbeknown to Miss Agatha, kept a "wish book." I suggested it to her, having found comfort in one myself. After years of wishing, it came to her as a great relief. It showed her at a glance how quickly one ceases to long for wishes ungratified.

I recommend it to any one as a very excellent and practical proof of the futility of wishing for things.

It is best to have three columns: one headed by the word "formed," another "gratified," and a third "abandoned." Under the respective headings, dates should be entered.

Most of my wishes found themselves, in course of time, under the heading "abandoned." It was sad; but in Miss Dorinda's case the wishes were in themselves so pathetic as to make it funny. "The cold chicken covered with white sauce" which she met at Lady Victoria's party and entered the following day,

the 16th of March, found itself in the "abandoned" column in the following September.

"It *does* show how quickly we change, dear," she said. But to me it seemed a long time to wish for a chicken covered with white sauce. How hot and long the summer must have seemed.

The saddest part of Miss Dorinda's story is that she was engaged to be married when the crash came. Most old ladies have been at some time of their lives, — or could have been if they had wished. When the fragments of the fortune were picked up and it was found impossible to piece them together again in any semblance of a fortune, the young man, with a charming bow, laid his hand on his heart and said he would never ask Dorinda to share his poverty. He loved her too well.

So like the young men in story-books, he rode away, and Miss Dorinda, like the young women in story-books, pined for a while, then took her courage in her two slim hands and determined to live it down. "He," at least, had behaved like a gentleman, — a true gentleman. He had loved her too well to ask her to share his poverty.

As I drove Ruth over the common and through lanes — with abundance of food spread out on either side of her — I thought of the excitement the Howards would be to Miss Dorinda, and to Miss Agatha too if she was in a mood which allowed her to say so.

Jane, by the way, was quite wrong in saying anything about the joy and privilege of sitting down on a hot day. I hardly sat down at all, Ruth was so tire-

some, and I found that standing up was the only thing, and the actual movement of standing up was the effectual part, so it was a thing constantly recurring and very tiring.

At last we arrived. The only thing Ruth did that afternoon willingly and of her own accord was to turn in at Miss Franklyn's gate. Round the carriage drive she went, skirting the fir tree with admirable precision, and stopped dead ten yards from the door.

"Go on, Ruth," I said. Not a bit of it. Out I got and walked on; she followed.

I rang the bell; Miss Franklyn was at home. Would the donkey stand for a moment?

"For ever," I said.

I wondered what Ruth thought on being taken round by a groom very little bigger than herself and certainly no older.

I was shown into the drawing-room, which is certainly not forty feet long. I love the room. It has about it an old-fashioned feeling and an old-fashioned scent. The black chair, inlaid with mother-of-pearl flowers, I knew was Miss Dorinda's. The needlework screen with a wooden frame must have been worked by an ancestress as gentle as herself. The miniatures on the wall were all like her. The Downmans were like Miss Agatha. I was glad they had saved the Downmans from the wreck. Perhaps some one had done it for them.

Miss Agatha is Chinese in her respect for her ancestors. One can see it in her jewellery.

The paper on the walls is French grey, with a design on it in gold — maidenhair fern, I think.

It is not perhaps what one would choose one's self. But then, on the other hand, Miss Agatha would never choose my old oak and whitewashed walls.

"Why people should wish to furnish their drawing-rooms with what our ancestors furnished their kitchens, I am at a loss to understand." So says Miss Agatha.

Therefore she has rosewood tables and work-tables with silk-covered balloons hanging from under them, the silk being in one case maroon, and in the other a vivid green. A black cloth glove hangs at the side of the fireplace, and I fell to wondering, as I waited for the old ladies, which of them poked the fire and whether from the top or the bottom, when in came Miss Agatha. Seeing her afresh, I was sure she poked the fire and undoubtedly from the bottom.

I should have to wait till the first of October, if I wished to prove it, but I don't. I was only wondering as I waited.

"Dear Christian," she said, "how very kind of you to come, and on such a hot day!"

"I thought you would like to hear about our new neighbours," I said, rather triumphantly, as one announces coat-pocket chocolates to a child.

Miss Agatha said something about the weather being trying for the sweet-peas, and I — a little crushed — said the Howards were such an acquisition.

Then Miss Agatha hastened to say something about the herbaceous border, and seeing, no doubt, my look

of disappointment, leaned towards me and said, "To tell you the truth, dear, I promised Dorinda not to begin until she came down. She was not ready at the moment you arrived. I waited for her as long as was consistent with good manners, then I was obliged to come. I promised that all news should be kept till she was able to participate in the interest."

I instantly returned to the effect of the weather on sweet-peas, and to the discussion as to the best way of keeping the herbaceous border bright until the Canon came to stay in the neighbourhood. I became feverishly incoherent in my desire to show Miss Agatha how I appreciated her self-denial. Besides, it was "cricket," was n't it. I did n't tell her that, as she would very naturally have said that she did n't play cricket. Her one idea of the game is that clumsy people are continually knocking down what other people take great pains to put up.

When Miss Dorinda came in she descended upon me with a soft, fluttering little movement, and Miss Agatha closing in, they said together, "Now!"

"So beautiful, is she?" murmured Miss Dorinda. "She is very beautiful, sister!" she said to Miss Agatha.

"My dear Dorinda, I heard perfectly. It calls for no comment. We can neither agree nor disagree, not having seen Mrs. Howard."

"Very beautiful!" purred Miss Dorinda.

"What sort of establishment do they keep?" asked Miss Agatha.

"There 's a butler," I said.

"Oh, I hope he 's a God-fearing man. It 's such a danger in a house! A hat hung up in the hall — regularly dusted, of course — does just as well for all practical purposes."

"They all wear bonnets — the maids, I mean. I think that looks well." This was a sop to Miss Agatha.

"It is right. There is no question of its looking ill or well. And you called, and your first impressions were favourable?"

"Yes, but I had seen her before." This was stupid of me, but I could n't resist it.

"Where?"

"Well, she came to see me!"

"Impossible! My dear Christian! Did it not upset you very much?"

"No, not very much," I said. "You see, she was in a difficulty, and I could help her."

"That, of course, makes a difference. But she could have applied in any difficulty to the Vicar; unless it was by chance anything to do with washing, then there was Mrs. Dare!"

"It was certainly incorrect," said Miss Dorinda, "but I understand that Mrs. Howard is Irish. Do you think, sister, that we — that Christian might — tell Mrs. Howard, or hint, rather, that we live a little differently now compared to how we lived when we were younger?"

"My dear Dorinda, it is quite unnecessary; if we cannot by our behaviour show Mrs. Howard who we

are and the position in which we were born, I am afraid no one can do it for us."

As the conversation was taking a serious turn, and Miss Dorinda was looking a little crushed, I began to talk about the children. She perked up at once, to be gently reminded by Miss Agatha that her spirits must not lead her astray.

I believe Miss Agatha thinks that unmarried women should show a certain delicacy with regard to the mention of children. Miss Dorinda is apt to forget it.

I said they must both come over and lunch with me and call on Mrs. Howard. This they said they would do on the first cool day. Otherwise they would not take the pony out. This I quite understood when it was explained to me by Miss Agatha that animals, like people, had their likes and dislikes.

This attitude was so inconsistent with Miss Agatha's character that I could only conjecture that the pony in a contest of will had come off triumphant, and that Miss Agatha deemed it wiser to give in gracefully. She was less lenient with her sister.

Having told them almost all I knew of the Howards, I said good-bye.

Off we started, Ruth and I. She always goes home well. It was a lovely evening. As we came out of the lane on to the common, the beauty of a scene so familiar struck me afresh, and I insisted that Ruth, in spite of what Miss Agatha had said, should stop. She looked round as she always does — as much as to say, "What 's up now?"

She may have wondered why I had tears in my eyes. To her, no doubt, one thistle in the mouth was worth all the purple distances in the world. As to summer skies and blue distances, what good were they? But fields of purple thistles! That was different. She looked away to the distance and wagged her ears.

I looked, too, and what gave me a lump in my throat may possibly have made her mouth water. To all of us a distance means something. It calls up the best in us. It does in me, and gives me a curious longing to be better than I am. I doubt whether Ruth felt that. What she may have felt was a longing for the unattainable, and I suppose my feeling was something of the same sort, seeking expression.

I, sentimentally, wished I had some one with me more responsive than Ruth.

I thought a great deal of the dear old ladies I had left, and I wondered, should I some day become like them?

Should I live that quiet, uneventful life? I did now — almost. But still I had wider interests, and there was always the hope that something was going to happen. I imagined that the old ladies were almost past that, if one ever can be.

What would Miss Dorinda have been, married? It was difficult to imagine her married and a mother. She was so easily shocked. She could only have been a mother to curates, and curates of the kind only to be seen on the stage and read of in books. To meet

one of the kind in real life would be interesting, although no unmarried woman can with impunity show any interest in a curate — in a village certainly.

Our Mr. Gray is a muscular Christian, but Jane says, for all that there 's nothing wild about him. It is reassuring! A wild curate is a thing not to be thought of.

As it is, I am not in the least afraid of meeting Mr. Gray — even in a dark lane! I never thought of him in that light at all. It was Miss Dorinda who put it into my head, by saying that if she could meet any man in a dark lane without dying of fright, it would be Mr. Gray. It certainly was high praise, and should be a great comfort to his mother if she knew.

Now Miss Agatha, I thought, might have had soldier and sailor sons. She might.

Then I began to wonder what my own might have been like, and I came to the conclusion that nothing less than a Pat would satisfy me. I was going on to pluralities in Pats — within certain limits — when Ruth sat down. It utterly disturbed my train of thought and brought me down to earth with a disagreeable suddenness. So it did Ruth, of course; but then I presume she knew it was coming.

I picked her up as best I could, and dusted her with a handful of bracken, — this she always expects, — and we were about to start again when she stopped dead. She had been quicker than I was to see Mr. Gray. I was not in the least afraid. He said it was very hot. I said it was not so hot as it had been. This

exchange of ideas gave Ruth a long-looked-for opportunity, and she began pulling at the bank.

"Howardy" news, and news that Lady Victoria and family had arrived, lasted us to the white gate, — short of my door, — where Mr. Gray always raises his hat and says, "Here we must part!"

I sometimes wonder why. Not that I wish it otherwise, but it would be interesting to know.

Lady Victoria is sure some one must once have proposed to him. She says she can always tell. It leaves a look and a cautiousness which in itself is unnatural — in curates.

Soon after Mr. Gray came to the village, the Vicar fell ill, and it devolved upon Mr. Gray to arrange the school treat. This necessitated several visits to my house, which seemed perfectly natural and proper. But it must have worried Jane dreadfully, because she said quite suddenly, after one of the visits, "I could never live in a clergyman's family, miss."

XIII

THERE remained then, of people who counted, only Lady Victoria. As she had known the Howards for years, her opinion of them from the village point of view, was not so interesting. To people who live a quiet life it is the speculation that is interesting, and first impressions that are most thrilling.

But still I wanted to see Lady Victoria, and the walk to Great Popham is delightful, and Great Popham itself charming.

Do you know houses where all doors close silently, where all carpets are soft, all chairs are comfortable, all vegetables are perfectly cooked, all servants move noiselessly, and where when you shut the top drawer of the wardrobe the next drawer opens?

Such a house is Great Popham.

In spite of the butler being automatically splendid and awe-inspiring, he fell into the trap, and announced me as "Miss Soap." I answer to the name now.

Across an archipelago of furniture I saw Lady Victoria, inches deep in correspondence, at her table.

It was characteristic of her that she did not look up, but said, "Why will these dear kind people ask us to dinner? It is so difficult to find excuses. Poppy won't go! The excuse of his arduous labours in the House is getting a little threadbare. I am so afraid that horrid joke, in that most scurrilous of papers, may have

reached these parts. Yes, my dear, you do! A silly joke that Poppy has only spoken once in the House, and then about the kitchens."

"Why won't he go now and then? It would give people such pleasure."

"Shall I tell you really why? You won't tell, swear? He cannot stand a kidney entrée in any form!"

"Well, as member I'm not sure that he ought not to swallow anything, and you as member's wife. There 's your tiara, for one thing! Mrs. Field asked me the other day if you had one!"

"Don't laugh at me. I can't wear that sort of thing to eat kidneys in. Now could I? You with your sense of fitness? Just wait — while I finish."

I waited and occupied myself with playing with a very delightful puppy, who, after every effort on my part to amuse, sat with his head on one side, saying as plainly as possible, "What next? Hurry up!"

"What 's the news?" said Lady Victoria, still writing.

"News?" I said. "It resolves itself into one word, — Howard."

"The Howards, dear people! And have the natives taken to them kindly? That reminds me — oysters — I 'm so glad — natives are not always to be trusted — of course, it 's not the right time for oysters — is it? How tiresome! I was only thinking of Poppy. I try to make the country attractive for him. Well, about the Howards, what were you saying, people like them?"

"We all think she is perfect."

"Well, you are all very nearly right. My dear — if you could have seen her when she first appeared in London! A star appears, does n't it? Well, she appeared. She was the rage and even more so afterwards, as a young married woman. They were the rage, both of them. Their poverty was so delightfully picturesque. I am almost sorry they are comparatively well-off now. It will hardly give them scope for their genius."

"It must be much more comfortable!"

"They will never be really comfortable. At least, not what I call comfortable. People never are who love their servants. If you really love your kitchen-maid you could n't ask her to get up in the dark on a cold morning. I do hope they won't lose it all. That 's what Poppy dreads."

"Lose it, why?" I said.

"Because David is quite the most hopelessly and delightfully guileless person in the world. Having married an angel of [illegible] he thinks all women are like angels. Mary is [illegible], so is he. He 's clever enough, but if any one came around with a kettle to sell he would n't look for the hole in the kettle. He 'd look at the tinker's face, and if that was all right he 'd take the kettle. It 's charming but dangerous."

Remembering Burridge, I was inclined to believe it.

"Of course," I said, "I have adored Mrs. Howard for years, from hearing about her from old Mr. Wallace."

"What a funny old man! He must once have loved

an Irish woman, there 's no other possible explanation. Has Aunt Augusta been down yet?"

"No, no one so far as I know. They are hardly settled."

"That would n't make any difference, I should say, knowing them. It would n't occur to them that if they could be happy uncomfortable, other people could n't be happy too. What does Mrs. Dare think of them, and Mrs. Durnford? Dear quaint women both of them. They still wear petersham belts, I suppose? I wonder if they were born in them! Don't make me laugh."

"I have n't the least wish to do so, I am going to speak very seriously to you. I want you to call on Mrs. Durnford!"

"Mrs. Durnford! My dear Christian! It 's quite impossible. How could I after all these years? Besides — a hundred things — it would be giving the doctor false hopes. I really cannot hand myself over to the ministrations of a doctor who hands the bag in church. Dear old Sir Christopher has managed me so beautifully all these years. He knows exactly the kind of disease a well-bred woman can have. It is so reassuring to know that if he does, with infinite pains, choose me a nice little disease, it is the very thing that there is no chance of my having."

"It would make Dr. Durnford's life so much happier, even if he never saw you!"

"His?"

"Yes, because she frets."

"My dear, you don't mean to tell me that a piece

of pasteboard could make all that difference! Heavens! it's easy to make some people happy. Must I leave them myself?"

"Yes."

"You are a martinet! Why, after all these years?"

"Because it's purely political, and you ought to have done it ages ago. You have traded on Little Popham being conservative to its backbone; but times are changing."

"They — are — indeed! But really it would break Poppy's heart if he did n't get in. He 's so busy now! So hard-worked! Poor Poppy, he used only to read 'The Daily Mail,' and now he reads 'The Times.'"

Lady Victoria was still writing and she did n't see how the puppy and I had been winking at each other. Suddenly she looked up and shot these words at me.

"Randal Grey is coming down to-morrow! Glad?"

"Yes, very."

"I should like more of a ring in your voice. Poor Ran, he 's been doing great things politically. It seems inspiring to some men to aim at the unattainable. I never saw any one so secretive as you are — talk of oysters! Or rather of Grays! There's that tiresome curate. Why in the world did he ever run anything or jump anything, and if he did, what is there in it? Cynthia is dreadfully sentimental about him. She has knitted innumerable woollen crossovers and has a perpetual cold in her nose in consequence. No girl knits wool in July without meaning it. I did get her — in

a moment of expansion — to discuss her trousseau supposing she married a curate. When I could get no farther than a short stout serge for week-days, and a less stout and less short serge for Sundays, and one evening frock with a yoke to take in or out, depending on whether she was dining here or at the Durnfords, she began to waver a little. She said, 'Why not things from Paris?' And I said it was absolutely immoral to distract a curate from his work."

"Poor Mr. Gray!" I said.

"There are more poor Grays than one, and seriously, Christian, I won't have Curate Gray's spiritual side hampered. I respect and admire the clergy, but they must, to keep that respect, marry women who will be of some help to them. Cynthia is a dear sentimental little goose. She must marry a clever man. She is just stupid enough to enjoy it. In return for her blind adoration he would have to allow her to s[illegible]ander a little. There is too much of Poppy in her to make it really dangerous. She is pretty, is n't she? There 's no doubt about it."

"Has he proposed?" I asked.

"I don't believe he would dare."

I was not so sure.

"And Margaret?" I said.

"She 's wonderfully well. D' you know, she has a great look of you. Such a mercy there can be no scandal. But the likeness is there and is rather curious. Ta[illegible]ng of clergymen — Mrs. Dare wants me to take a mothers' meeting."

"I always said she had no sense of humour."

"Why, what 's the matter with me? Was there ever a better mother?"

"I dare say not. It only strikes the puppy as being so funny," I said. "I see nothing so very funny about it."

"The puppy? — wretch! He ate my new stays last night. I heard a scrunching in the middle of the night. 'Bones,' I thought to myself. 'I must be dreaming of lions!' In the morning I found the wreck of three and a half guineas! It 's nothing to laugh at! I was wondering — talking of the mothers' meeting — if we should have a conjurer."

"At the mothers' meeting?"

"Why not? It would be a change. They don't generally have them, do they?"

"Not as a rule. They read 'Bobby's ball,' or 'Polly's penwiper.'"

"That might still be done, and the conjurer could bring the books out of the mothers' bonnets, could n't he? Then it would, perhaps, remind him of his own mother — which is always so good for men. I must suggest it to Mrs. Dare."

"Yes, do!"

"Why that exultation? I am not likely to be here when mothers meet. It 's in the winter, is n't it?"

I was feeling so frivolous and so foolish and the puppy was so nice, that when the door opened and a voice I remembered in a far-off, faint sort of way, said, "Am I disturbing confidences?" a cold shudder went

down my back, and I looked up from an undignified position on the floor, to find myself confronted by —

"Sir Wallace Hampden — Miss Hope," said Lady Victoria, still writing. "Do talk — forgive me, I must finish these letters. How much are or is seventeen half-crowns, Christian?"

Then he said, — recovering himself before I did; he was not on the floor, whereas I was, — "It is a very long time since we met!"

"A very long time," I said.

By this time I, too, stood — on the defensive; he saw that.

"You have met?" said Lady Victoria.

"Yes, in India," said Sir Wallace.

"Years ago, then; Christian was a child?"

"Children are such precocious things — in India," he said, in the voice I remembered, the same bantering manner I hated. Why should this have happened? All on a summer's day, too.

Gaining courage I looked at him. How he had changed! And yet how little! I suppose he was thinking how I had changed.

"Do go on talking," said Lady Victoria. "You must have so much to say about India. People who have known one another in India are always so extraordinarily friendly."

"We are afraid you will listen!" — then in an undertone to me, "You still wear pink, I see; in your cheeks, too."

I flushed puce, I am sure, with rage. He laughed.

"Do you hear from India?"

"From some parts," I said.

"Not from others?"

"Not from some others," I said.

He laughed again. "I think the rôle of martyr suits you. It certainly becomes you."

That was all. Not much of a conversation. My one longing was to get away. I made excuses to Lady Victoria.

"Do stay to luncheon," she said. "Sir Wallace is n't as alarming as he looks. Do stay and amuse him."

I said I was sorry I could n't.

"So am I," he said, bowing ceremoniously over my hand.

"Christian!" called Lady Victoria, "don't forget Randal Grey is coming to-morrow. Come up to luncheon — or dinner — or anything you like. He is n't sure whether he can stay the night."

"Why, oh why," I said to myself as I walked home, "should this have happened just as I was so happy?"

I stayed in the rest of the day, not daring even to go into the garden, idiotic and cowardly though it was of me!

Worse than anything, I hung the horseshoe on the handle of the door, so I denied myself even the comfort of Pat.

Jane brought me cups of tea at intervals, until I could have screamed. It is her panacea for all ill. She puts the cup down and goes. One can drink the tea

or not as one likes. With less than her usual tact — or perhaps thinking I could n't be really bad if I could n't drink tea, she said, "If you feel well enough, miss, what about the pink tea-gown?"

"Send it to be dyed black."

"Black, miss? The pink 's all right. I thought a little alteration, perhaps."

"I hate pink, and everything pink, Jane. Give it away."

Jane said nothing. Her eyebrows performed gymnastics, that was all. It is sometimes a relief to tell Jane things, because she says so little. She never goes a step farther than one wishes her to go. So I said, "I met Sir Wallace at Great Popham to-day."

Jane stood and looked at me; then said, "He can't do any harm now, miss."

These words came as a sort of comfort. Jane was so sure of things.

"I suppose not, Jane, but it all spoils a summer's day."

"There 's lots more summer coming, miss; why jam-making 's only just begun."

That again was comforting.

"Mr. Randal Grey is coming to-morrow."

"Why do they all come together, miss?"

"Why?"

"Perhaps it 's as well to get it over."

"There seem too many men in the world, Jane."

Jane thought a second, then said, "In some stations of life, miss."

I felt better after I had confided in my faithful Jane. It was not for nothing that she had donned a cap and apron when it was decided that I could hardly afford to keep a maid — pure and simple —

"Not that I 'm either one or the other," said Jane.

XIV

THE next day brought further perplexity in its train.

It passed quite uneventfully until the evening. I did not go up to Great Popham to see Randal Grey, neither did he come to see me. Jane had been silently sympathetic. The teapot had rested in its cupboard undisturbed until the usual and proper hour for tea. The pink tea-gown had been hung up again, and I could think of it with equanimity. I was feeling better. India seemed far, far away. The memory of its glamour was coming back, obliterating the memory of one night.

"A note from Great Popham, miss," said Jane. She brought it to me after dinner. I was sitting at the window.

I opened the note, dreading what I might read, but not expecting this: "What have you done with Randal? Send him up at once! Sir Wallace is horribly *intrigué* — besides, I want to see him — he came down to see me!"

Could anything be more annoying, and at such a time!

I hastily wrote, "Have neither seen nor heard anything of Randal." I handed the note to Jane.

"They said there was no answer, miss."

"How tiresome! The answer is most important and the man has gone, I suppose?"

"Oh no, miss."

"Well — why — then it 's all right."

Where could Randal Grey be? How horribly impetuous Lady Victoria was, how odiously inquisitive Sir Wallace!

I went to bed, and after a while I slept. I awoke in the morning with a strange uncomfortable feeling hanging over me. A serpent had glided into my paradise. Perhaps, as Jane said, his fangs were no longer poisonous, but it was horrid to feel he was there.

I always find a certain comfort in gardening, so I drew on my gloves and, armed with a basket and a pair of scissors, I sallied forth to tidy up the roses.

Jane came out and looked at me, pretended to pick up something by way of tidying up, and walked away. She evidently thought I was looking all right.

As I, one by one, cut off the dead roses and dropped them into my basket, my anxieties became lulled and the world looked bright and "Howardy" again, and I wondered what they were doing — Pat in particular?

And I wondered whether a tinker — other than Burridge — would really come to the village — and whether Mr. Howard would really look at the tinker's face and not at his wares? And whether it would n't be a delightful world if all men looked for the good in things instead of the bad — in other things than kettles — and why such men as Wallace Hampden should live and prosper, and why women should like them? And why Randal Greys did n't marry — and

why unmarrying women could n't be left unmarried, in peace — and why soldiers were the most delightful men in the world, and yet believed things that were not true — and why Jane was so faithful, and why cooks let things boil and not simmer — and why gardens were never disappointing — and why I felt happier in the garden than anywhere else — and why I was such an idiot as to mind when it was so long ago — and why I had been so silly as ever to have made a mystery of it — and a thousand other things I wondered — why?

Then I began to hum, which showed I felt better and it did n't hurt any one else, as I was alone. But I was n't; a shadow fell across me, and I looked up to see Randal Grey.

Down, down, down, to the depths went my spirits, and yet he looked so nice. Any spinster — however confirmed — might have been pleased to see that look in his eyes. But this one was n't. She wished his shadow had been less; the size of Pat's, in fact.

"And where were you yesterday?"

"Lady Victoria was very angry with me," he said.

"No wonder. So was I." I hesitated to tell him that she had written to me to deliver him up. However, he knew it.

"She told me she had written to you."

"Yes, it was very annoying of her."

"But you understand her little ways?"

"Yes, *I* do."

"Who does n't? I know, Christian, so it 's no use

trying to hide it. It 's that unspeakable cad, Hampden. Forgive me. Why can't nice women discriminate where men are concerned?"

"They do sometimes."

"Some women, perhaps."

"Lady Victoria knows you!"

"She likes Hampden."

"Does she?"

"Well, he amuses her."

"Has he been amusing her particularly just now?"

"That 's what I wonder. At the same time I want to know if it is n't time to put an end to this farce? Why make a secret unnecessarily? Tell me what there is to tell — why not?"

"For the same reason there has always been."

"You insist on that still?"

"Of course; why should I ever have done it otherwise?"

"You ought never to have done it!"

"But I did."

"It must be the most foolish little story in the world."

"It is."

"I imagine you are shielding one man; am I right there? What about the other? It is rather noble of me to plead for a rival, is n't it? There is no hope for me, is there? I want you to be happy."

"But I am!" I said.

"Are you? Then that 's all right. I sometimes wonder if he is."

"Why not? Do you suppose he remembers?"

"How could he ever believe it? You will allow me to say that? It may not be generous, but it's human. I'm frightfully human."

"I call it rather inhuman to come and torture a poor defenceless woman — in her own garden, too — where she can't answer back."

Randal Grey shook his head. He gave me up in despair. I knew what had happened. Wallace Hampden had been talking, and Randal Grey was burning to take up the cudgels for me.

"Let's talk about something else," I said.

"About trout?"

"Yes, come and see them."

We walked down to the river in silence. Then he said, —

"I have a bone to pick with Lady Victoria."

"So have I."

"Mine is about John Lovell. You remember I have spoken about him?"

I nodded.

"He has artistic ambitions, and every other sort of ambition that promises to make his life an uncomfortable one. Well, he came to me one day — in town, of course — full of enthusiasm, with a portfolio full of other things under his arm. Not knowing what to do with him, I sent him off to Grosvenor Square to see Lady Victoria. She knows everybody worth knowing — and otherwise — artistic and very much otherwise. I wrote to her carefully explaining the boy's position.

The note she must have put behind the clock — unopened. I am sure she listened to him quite kindly for a time. The boy says she was simply ripping. But she never can stand much of anything, as you know. Of course, she must have been frightfully bored. The wonder was that John had the wit to spin out the conversation. He says there were no pauses. The fact was, it was pelting cats and dogs, and his boots had holes in them. He ought to have told me that — of course. Then Lady Victoria insisted that he must have a cab. Whereupon John appears to have said that he really *was* going and did n't want a cab. But, no, she rang the bell, and said, 'A hansom.' Well, the hansom came, and poor John got into it without a shilling in his pocket. When he got round the corner up went his hand through the trap door. 'I say, cabby,' he said, 'I have n't got a bob in the world; drop me, like a good chap!' The cabby was a sportsman, and dropped the boy on to the step of a waiting 'bus. John took his name and address. I wonder why! And the cabby said, 'I 'll drive you to the Palace yet, sir!' 'Did he think I was a confounded face contortionist?' says John."

It was nice of Randal to tell such a long story.

"How like Lady Victoria. But where were you yesterday?" I said.

"So I 'm to tell another story, am I? Well, — as our old nurse used to say, — it happened like this. When I stepped out of the train yesterday morning, almost out on to the common, it looked so gloriously

fresh, so beautiful after London — Politics, Christian, are poor things. I call this life!"

"It would n't satisfy you for long."

"Try me! No, forgive me, I must remember the defenceless woman in her garden. It looked so beautiful — the common, I mean — that I said I would walk, and my luggage went up to Great Popham."

"So they knew you had arrived?"

"Yes, they knew. Well, I had wandered some miles, I suppose, when I came face to face with a vision of childish beauty — "

"Peggy!" I said.

"So she said. Feeling in my bones that I intruded where it was evident fairies dwelt, I bethought myself of an excuse, a reasonable excuse — and taking off my hat, I said, 'Does Mrs. Brown live here?' This same Peggy, puzzled, puckered up her eyebrows, and said, 'Mrs. Brown? No, our mother lives here.'"

"Dear Peggy," I said, "I can hear her."

"Don't interrupt, Christian."

"So sorry."

"'Granted,' as they say in 'buses. Well, to return to my story, I said I was afraid I was trespassing, and Peggy said, 'No'; then she added, 'Besides, we must forgive those that trespass against us.' Then I said, 'What about "Trespassers will be prosecuted"?' I pointed to the board just over her head. She looked up, thought, and then said they were not holy words. Then she added, 'It 's everybody's here, only there 's

only us.' Then I asked how many that made all together, and she told me. I decided that it would be quite impossible to do with less, supposing them to be all like Peggy. She then told me that Jack and Baby were trying to catch a rabbit in a butterfly net, but not to hurt it. I asked if they could catch one; it seemed such a difficult thing to do. She said they could — no doubt — only they talked so loud so the rabbits knew they were there.

"She then took a medicine bottle out of a satchel, and I asked her what she was going to do. She said it was water, and she was going to fill the acorn cups with water for the birds, so that they would n't have to go so far for water. Then she asked me if I was coming to see her mother. You can imagine that I wished I were, and she said, 'Why not?' I saw no reason except Lady Victoria's anger. That I risked. By this time we had got to a small gate at the edge of a wood, and I went through. I saw 'Mother' and I stayed. That 's the whole story."

"Is n't she lovely?" I said.

"She is, and curiously enough she produced in course of time a letter all about me, written in the year one, by my Aunt Theodosia, describing me as a dear intelligent boy. Imagine that! And it turns out that Mrs. Howard was the friend she used to write to me about, and we only meet now."

"Better, perhaps, now than then."

"You mean that I can better appreciate it now, or that my affections being — that is a forbidden sub-

ject? Well, I was always susceptible. I should have valued it then."

"You think that it is important that if a boy is to fall in love, he should fall in love with the right sort of woman."

"Of the very greatest importance! Now tell me your story! I have told you two."

I shook my head.

"You will when you can?"

"It will give you no hope."

"No Christian Hope? And my rival?"

"It is too late."

"He deserves it. Hampden leaves to-day. I think Lady Victoria knows what he is really. She has these absurd friendships because Poppy bores her. You know where to find me if you want me? You are a perverse and foolish young woman. The truth of the matter is that you are quite happy without any of us!"

"If only you would believe that."

"Mr. Howard thinks you are a wonderful creature."

"Don't, don't say that he thinks I ought to be married!"

I put my hands over my ears, and Randal walked away, laughing.

Why didn't I like him more? I hated him going away, and I think I wanted him to stay! Wasn't that a thing near enough to love? Was I wise? I was; but what does a woman's age matter until it comes to

lost contours? Then there remains — if she can stoop to it — weeding and — oh, several things.

"What 's this, miss, I hear about Mr. Gray being lost yesterday? I saw him go up the village to church young Mrs. Hedger, in the afternoon. Was it after that he was lost? And what had we got to do with it?"

"It was the other Mr. Grey, Jane."

"There! I said I could n't imagine our Mr. Gray lost."

"If you should, by chance, Jane, be going up the village, would you leave this note for Mrs. Puttidge?"

"I was thinking I could go if you were wanting anything, miss," said Jane.

In such ways do the best of women seek to deceive themselves, and others.

XV

I DO not know whether the village street is as interesting to any one else as it is to Jane. I should say not, unless a wayfarer should walk down it with a letter to post; then he might be glad to know that at Mrs. Barley's can be bought many things, among them a postage stamp.

The stamp will taste of pepper. There is novelty in that, for those who seek it for itself alone; otherwise I do not recommend the taste. It might be a comfort to the wayfarer to learn that the stamp, despite its taste and general limpness, will safely convey a letter to any part of the United Kingdom.

He might also like to be told that Mrs. Barley is very obliging with her tongue, and is ever ready to do the kindness of licking for a passing stranger, if he, in return, will say what his business is, and what he thinks of Little Popham.

He should accept the loan of her tongue, because in so doing he may be conferring a great benefit on somebody; since Mrs. Barley cannot say things about people and lick at the same time. She is too thorough in her methods.

Well, at Mrs. Barley's the stranger could buy — if he liked — striped cotton material, boot-laces, herrings, tea, coffee, cocoa, bacon, and mending — natural and black; bulls' eyes, of course, and peppermints of other

kinds, and curious stuff that hangs from the ceiling and looks like cocoons. That is because of the string, which, deeply imbedded, is wound round it. Jane says it is bacon. I can hardly believe it. It may be, and in any case the wayfarer, not wanting that at the moment, can get flannel — grey and red — and sugar, of course, and soap, mixed biscuits, and blacking, and black lead, and red apples — if the time of year be right. They stand over in the corner, by the cheese.

He can buy braces and a blue flannel cap, with a leg worked on it in the act of kicking a ball. It is, strangely enough, called a cricket cap.

All these things he can buy, if he first opens the door and tinkles the bell which hangs behind the door. Mrs. Barley answers to no other summons — stamp on the floor as much as you will. Therefore, if the door be open, the stranger must either shake it, or close it and open it again with determination. Then Mrs. Barley will come from the back regions, wiping her hands on her apron, and all the treasures may be his, if he pays for them. That is a stipulation Mrs. Barley makes, although she is open to a bargain. I once bought an inkpot from her, and when I asked how much it was, she said she did n't rightly know, but her Ladyship had paid sixpence for one like it. So, of course, I did likewise. If her Ladyship is to set the price, it is as well that she is not wont to overpay. It would be bad for us and good for trade if Mrs. Howard were to set the price.

I have often heard Lady Victoria wonder how the

poor manage to spend all their money. I should like to take her into Mrs. Barley's shop some Saturday night and let her see what a woman can do with a shilling. It makes me ashamed.

We will imagine that we are walking down the street, so we will close Mrs. Barley's door and go straight along until we come to old Marshgold's. He is the wheelwright, and, to show what he can do when he tries, is a wheelbarrow with a yellow inside, a blue body, and a red wheel. How much happier life would be if all wheelbarrows were like that. There are cheerful splashes of red paint about Marshgold's shop that I love, and a wheel in making is a very interesting thing. Moreover, Marshgold can talk and work at the same time. It, of course, depends a good deal on what he talks about.

He has a great sorrow. It is as well to avoid that subject. To carry out proposed improvements in the churchyard it would be necessary to move his wife's tombstone. He has spent hours sitting on that stone, and he threatens to sit there till he dies if they try to move it. I believe he would. I earnestly hope they may find some way out of the difficulty. No improvements could justify the breaking of that dear old man's heart.

Farther on we come to the smithy. That, too, I love, especially when the horseshoes are white hot and the bellows roar.

Those are really all the shops, proper. There are one or two people who bake bread from motives of

condescension or because of pecuniary straits, suddenly arisen.

There is also Ann Peck, who flaunts over her door a board proclaiming her right to sell snuff and tobacco. I have never heard of her taking advantage of the permission.

There is therefore a simplicity in shopping in our village, just as there is a simplicity in most things — even in living and dying.

Mrs. So-and-so has a baby — it is an every-day occurrence, somewhere, or might be, so there is no call for excitement over that.

As to dying? Well, when old So-and-so dies, people wag their heads and say, "Well, well, he's lived his time," and they go on patiently living theirs, and when their call comes they answer it, — some more willingly than others, but they all seem ready.

This applies to the old. The young seldom die in our village: sometimes a child or a grown-up, from an accident; then they are "cut off," which is a very different thing, and it is talked of for weeks.

There are sins in our village; but men are men, so the villagers say, and some of them are born to drink and other things, and you can't help it. There are others who are good, and they have no call to boast; they can't help it either. The woman who marries the good one is lucky, and she who marries the drunkard is a poor soul, and she 's got to put up with it. And she it is who must work and support her man, and look to her children to keep her in her old age.

She does put up with it with a strange loyalty which is difficult to fathom. Does she, perhaps, not care?

Look into her eyes, and you will read there the answer she would not bring her lips to speak. So God made woman.

In the case of the old Hedgers, Mr. Hedger, being the younger, had to do all the work, — as was right and proper, — as these things go by age in our village, until some interfering relative looked things up in the family Bible and found therein, by undeniable records, that Mrs. Hedger was the younger. So it is Mrs. Hedger who draws the water from the well now, and digs the potatoes, and gets up in the morning and lights the fire.

But see now how things work out for good! It was the worker and the younger who was to drink the beer.

Old Hedger says he is thinking of going against precedent and of taking to drawing the water, and hewing the wood himself, and then the other things that cling to the office will by right be his.

It 's a matter, after all, between his old woman and himself. I don't believe Mrs. Hedger will mind. She says she never was one for beer.

XVI

"Mrs. Mangle 's back, I see, miss," said Jane. "It 's wonderful what an upset it means when a maiden lady dies."

"A maiden lady in particular?"

"Well, yes, I think so, miss; they 're well to do as a rule, are n't they?"

"Well, not very, taking myself as an example."

"You 're not exactly a maiden lady, are you, miss?"

"Yes, certainly, Jane."

"Not to my mind you 're not, miss. In a sense you are, perhaps. But it 's a question of age, is n't it? Maiden ladies are elderly, as a rule."

"I see."

I was relieved.

"Is Mangle going out again alone or is Mrs. Mangle going with him?"

"She thinks she 'll have to go with him, miss. All the advertisements say 'no encumbrance,' that 's the difficulty. I can't think myself how a lady can bring herself to use the word of an innocent lamb, or expect other people to use it."

"I quite agree with you, Jane."

"To properly married people, miss, I can't see where the encumbrance comes in — as long as there are n't too many. That hampers. Now Lottie — that 's

different! Did you see her go up the village this morning?"

"No, I did n't."

"Perhaps you would rather not talk about it, miss; but it 's there, so what 's the use of pretending it is n't? It 's not as if you were n't old enough to know."

"You 're quite right, Jane, but it hurts all the same."

"Yes, miss, of course it does. Sin is sin, I always say so, and it 's no use pretending it is n't. But talk about encumbrances! That will be one, if you like, and she not all there!"

"Is he going to marry her?"

"Yes, miss, they say so. But what 's the good of that? Fancy for ever having a man bringing it up against you every Sunday!"

"Why Sunday, Jane?"

"More time at home, miss. Lots of women could put up with a husband if it was n't for Sundays."

"It 's frightfully sad, Jane."

"So it is, miss. They say it 's wonderful the way Mr. Gray 's beginning to tackle the young men. So that may do good. His blushing so was against him at first. But he 's getting better of that or else it 's more fixed. Mr. Dare is too hard, I think, and Mrs. Dare is too much wishing to make examples. It does n't seem to answer!

"I think if you were passing, Mrs. Mangle would like to see you, miss."

I made a point of passing Mrs. Mangle's cottage,

or rather I stopped and walked up the garden-path. I found the encumbrance sitting on the doorstep, which was very kind of her, because the doorstep was red, and her cotton frock was blue — washed and faded to just the right colour — and her eyes were blue and her hair was gold, and she was a pink and white encumbrance with dimples in her cheeks and smiles in her eyes. The doorstep her throne, her realm at her feet, her most valued possessions in her lap. The idol of her parents — utterly oblivious of the fact that she was there contrary to the most sacred promises on the part of her father.

I stepped over the encumbrance, with the greatest care, and found Mrs. Mangle about to make a very big cake and a very little cake. The "Morning Post" lay open before here at "Situations Vacant."

"You see, miss, it 's the same thing all the way down," and Mrs. Mangle ran a floury finger down the column.

"Mangle wrote about a place yesterday, — the day before, I should say, — but he could n't bring himself to say anything about the encumbrance, although she was sitting on his knee at the time, and as she was jumping up and down, I thought it would be as well to explain the fact, seeing what the writing was like. He 's terrible taken up with that child. We do think a lot of her, and it 's very hard to part with her. People say we should put her out to board, but Mangle can't see his way to it — coming as she did — a surprise, so to speak. You see, when I married Man-

gle, he never meant that I should go out with him. He was n't the sort of man that could n't keep a wife. He had the figure for it. But it so happened that he did n't get the right sort of place. There 's a lot of luck about it. Not but what he did n't get a good place — in a sense — but it was the wrong side of the park — you know what I mean? Then his figure gave way — so to speak. You often see that in married couples. It 's very difficult to get things even — figure and cooking. The way he started the wrong side of the park was this. You see, he had an aunt living there, who was housekeeper to an elderly lady and gentleman — very wealthy, but not quite real gentry, you understand, miss? The old lady died, and then Mangle's aunt was a wonderful comfort to the old gentleman; she was his teetotum, in fact. Then the butler died, and the aunt — she spoke a word for Mangle, and the old gentleman said, 'Your nephew? It is sufficient!' So Mangle got the place according. We married while he was there, and after the old gentleman died, Mangle tried hard to get a suitable place, but everything seemed to go wrong; and seeing as how we had no family, I said I would go out with him. You see, miss, I was a great attraction, being, so to speak, a good cook. It 's not pride to say so, because it 's what you 're born or not born — if only women would believe it, and ladies not blame cooks for not being able to cook."

"But, Mrs. Mangle," I said, "if cooks say they can cook?"

"They think they can, and they can only speak according to their knowledge. Besides, if only those who could cook were cooks, there would n't be enough to go round, not nearly. Well, we got an excellent place with an elderly lady who entertained a great deal, and perhaps Mangle took too much upon himself — he does at times — more from habit than anything. Anyhow he made promises — well, miss, when Baby was coming I had to tell the old lady, and she took it as personal. She was very much upset, not more so than Mangle! He had to sit down when I told him first off. The old lady afterwards said she was more hurt than angry. Anyhow, we had to go."

The cakes were mixed and ready for baking, and Mrs. Mangle put them in and slammed the oven door.

"And there 's the encumbrance. You would n't say so to look at her, would you, miss?"

The encumbrance grew shy, put out her tongue, and tried to disappear through the crack of the door.

"Then you see, miss, Mangle got the place at the Hall and we were very happy, as you can imagine. Miss Harpenden thought no end of Mangle, — as well she might, — and she was quite taken up with the baby, and saw what a good housemaid she would make by and by."

I suggested that she might be a cook, but Mrs. Mangle said that remained to be seen. She did n't shape that way. It was housemaiding she seemed to take to.

"She was a kind lady, was Miss Harpenden. There

are those who will miss her more than we do. We can work. We 're going after a place to-morrow. The advertisement says nothing about encumbrances. We 'll see!"

"What do you do with Baby?" I asked.

"I 'll leave her with Mrs. Martin. She 's a kind woman, and since she lost her own she likes to come and hold Baby. The feel of her comforts — though it brings it back all the worse, poor soul! Empty arms must be the worst feeling of all, miss! Better have no children, I say! Not that I suppose poor Mrs. Martin's ache is better yet, or will be for a long while. Baby 's as good as gold, only she 's very venturesome. She does n't know what fear is. She takes after her father in that. One thing I am thankful for, she took at once to Mrs. Martin. She just put out her little arms the first time, just as if it was her own mother. I was glad of that. You never know with children! They have a terrible power to hurt without knowing it."

I said good-bye to the encumbrance; but she was busy nursing a doll discarded from some rich child's nursery. It had lost much of its distinctive beauty, but still it was dear to the encumbrance and she watered it now and then from a small watering-pot and dried it with her pinafore.

"Good-bye, miss, and thank you kindly," said Mrs. Mangle. "By the way, miss, there 's great things come to Little Popham since we left."

"The Howards?" I said.

"Well, I was going to say Mrs. Howard, first of all."

"It makes all the difference, Mrs. Mangle."

"It 's company for you, miss. But you ought to get married; we 'd be proud to serve you."

"I could n't afford such a cook. I 'll wait for the housemaid! Good-bye."

I walked down the brick path, turning at the gate to wave to the encumbrance.

How inconsiderate of Miss Harpenden to die!

How much more so of people to object to the encumbrance.

What could be more picturesque than a golden-haired encumbrance in a blue frock sitting in the sunshine on the doorstep? People lacked a true sense of beauty.

I met Mrs. Howard on my way home and we walked together. We talked of the encumbrance, and of other things. I am sure if it had been possible she would have taken the Mangles — encumbrance and all — but, of course, she had a cook and Wisdom. But the encumbrance! She told me she was on her way to see Lottie.

There was something in the tone of her voice that made me look at her. There was a look of such divine compassion on her face that I felt a load lifted off my heart. I seemed to see hope in the future for Lotties. If Mrs. Dare's way did n't do, this must.

"What shall you say to her?" I asked.

"I don't think there is much to say, poor child. In all probability she has heard all there is to say. It re-

mains for us to help her. I want her to do something for me. She is a very good needlewoman, I hear."

I told Jane that evening that I thought I saw hope in the future for Lotties.

"Mrs. Howard, miss?" said Jane.

"Yes; how did you know?"

"The vicarage cook told me. She says she does n't hold with encouraging such things. Mrs. Howard does n't do that? You could tell it by her face, could n't you, miss?"

"If you had seen her face, Jane."

"I said to the cook that we other kind of women need n't grudge a poor girl a kind look. You 'd almost think she thought the poor thing was enjoying herself. I don't see myself any attraction in that sort of thing."

"Jane, you have such a very strange way of looking at things."

"So have most people, miss, only they have n't the truthfulness to say so. I hear Lottie was seen this afternoon, crying fit to break her heart. She 's been sullen up to now. Mrs. Howard has given her baby clothes to make — beautiful things — all tucks and lace! Lottie is a beautiful worker, with all her faults. It was the sight of the clothes that softened her, I think. She was upset at being thought good enough to make clothes for a wanted baby. It 's some grand baby, too — judging by the clothes. Was that what you meant by a new way, miss?"

"Yes, Jane, I think it was."

XVII

THE next day I took the whole of the Howard family for a picnic. It had been the suggestion of Pat. He came to me, and sitting himself down on an inverted flower-pot, he proceeded to put to me in language sufficiently plain that it was my duty to do something frightfully exciting.

"Let 's do something," he said.

"Well, what, Pat?"

"That 's just it," he said. "What?"

"Let 's think."

I frowned and looked as intent as I could.

"I don't think it 's much use doing that. Can't you just think all at once?"

"Shall we play hide-and-seek all over the house?"

"All over?" he said. "I think we know all over so extra well." It was his polite way of saying the house was over small and well known.

"Let 's try again."

"Not paddling?" said Pat.

"No, not paddling."

"Nor red Indians?" he said thoughtfully.

"No, not red Indians," I said.

"Why not?" he said.

"Oh, I don't know."

"But you said."

"Because you did!"

"Yes, but you must say of your own accord. Not red Indians?"

"Well, we might have red Indians and something else at the same time."

"But then you did n't think of it yourself."

"Well, shall we have a picnic?"

I felt quite unable to suggest anything original.

"An extra exciting sort of picnic?"

"Yes, I thought so, Pat."

"What sort?"

"Well, we might have a picnic and red Indians as well. We might cook things!"

"Real things?"

"Yes."

"To eat?"

"Of course, if we could eat them."

"That would be spiffling."

"What would it be, Pat?"

"Spiffling; go on."

"We might cook lunch —"

"Dinner."

"Dinner, then, and tea."

"What should we cook?"

"Eggs and bacon."

"What else?"

"Well, we might begin with that."

"Then it would be breakfast."

"It does n't matter."

"Shall we take things out of the larder in the night?"

"No, I will bring all the food."

"Now, who shall come to our picnic?"

That was a matter of the greatest importance. Margaret Popham, Pat thought, was too grand. "It would be like having a queen to a picnic. She wears gloves."

I said I thought she was n't really grand, and I knew she would n't wear gloves because she would have to cook. That seemed to strike Pat as a great joke. It was decided, therefore, that Margaret should be asked.

It was a lovely day, and even Ruth rose to the occasion, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she did n't once sit down. We took wonderful things to eat — not depending entirely on the cooking powers of any of the party. We lit a fire — which took ages to burn — and we cooked. We played robbers and hide-and-seek and red Indians. Tommy was the fiercest of red Indians, and Baby the kindest of lions. Red Indians and lions do not properly go together, but they did on this occasion.

We were all prisoners in turn, those of us who could be spared from other things. Margaret was very like a queen; she was so beautiful. She ruled us all just as if she were a queen. She settled on the place for the picnic. It must be just there, and nowhere else, because there was water quite close and trees, and it was altogether such a lovely place. There were other reasons, too. I learned them later.

"Dear Christian, you must go there."

And we went; I think because Margaret's eyes are

like beautiful pansies, and because her voice has something in it that makes one want to please her, rather than anything to do with the place. However, it was lovely; there were trees and there was water.

Later, there came pricking o'er the plain a knight.

Margaret's cheeks deepened to the colour of her cotton frock, which was a beautiful deep rose colour, and her eyes brightened. She busied herself with the fire. But as the young man had, in all probability, received most minute instructions as to the exact spot where there were trees and water and Margaret, there was no danger of his passing them by. He drew rein and asked if any one would be so kind as to tell him where he was. He was lost.

That I verily believed. I felt strongly inclined to say, "Within two yards of Margaret — that 's where you are!"

But at the sound of his voice she rose, and with the prettiest surprise possible said, "You" — just in the voice that meant that "you" for the moment, at all events, were everything in the world. I don't suppose there is a man living who has n't heard the word so accentuated. But perhaps not quite as Margaret said it, because she has that rarest of things, — a beautiful voice.

It was my turn to blush. How easily I had been taken in.

How could I have supposed that Margaret, fresh from a season in London, could care to go for a picnic with me and a few children. Here we were out for

a long day, and Marga... perhaps with a forbidden young man.

"Mother likes him enormously," she whispered, and I could do nothing but whisper back that I was delighted to see him.

Having provided the food constituted me hostess. But from that moment onwards until just before the end, it was Margaret's picnic, and he read his welcome in her eyes alone.

He was a soldier, it transpired, and he was certainly born to camp out, so splendidly did he make the fire burn — with Margaret's hindrance. I wondered if he would burn his fingers. Margaret had several young men for whom she threw a wonderful meaning into the word "you." But I, being rather sentimental, hoped this might be the right one. How little I knew!

Curiously enough, it was hide-and-seek that was the most popular game, and Margaret knew such good hiding-places that I got a little vexed. It was not much fun for the children.

"I thought Margaret was going to play with us," said Pat sadly.

The young man heard it and saw the unfairness of it, because he was fond of children, and he and Pat became great friends.

Then it ceased to be Margaret's picnic and she began to be bored and proud, especially when the young man, in a moment of weakness, began to tell stories. Then there was no peace left for him. He began by

saying that, once upon a time, he asked a rhinoceros and a hippopotamus and a giraffe to tea.

"W-ere t-hey all s-ick?" asked Jack.

Then he told other sorts of stories, but they were told for Margaret's benefit really, and they were all about proud princesses who scorned their faithful lovers because they chose duty before love, and Pat, getting rather tired of moralising, said, "Did they get married and live happy ever after?"

"I don't know. I think Miss Margaret knows."

"Did they, Margaret?" said Pat.

"And if they did n't get married, what happened?" said practical Peggy, forgetting that there are other occupations in life.

"He rode away to the wars and was killed," said the young man.

"W-as his head cut off?" said Jack; "or w-as he f-rowed to the lions?" this very anxiously, with a distinct leaning to lions.

The young man lay on the grass and the children scrambled over him. Margaret sat — her chin in her hands, with her elbows on her knees, and thought, no doubt, that this was not what she called a picnic.

The young man pulled a blue ribbon that hung below Baby Howard's frock, and Baby, frowning, said, "You must n't do that!"

"May I pull this?" he asked, touching a ribbon which held a tiny locket round her neck.

She put her little arms round his neck and said in a loud whisper, "Anyfing outside — but not my dwawers."

Then the party broke up.

Margaret did not play the game. She kissed Guy Lindsay's horse and made much of it in a very attractive way. She put her arms round its neck. It seemed to me so unnecessarily unkind.

"Margaret, Margaret." I said as we parted.

"It 's all right, dear Christian, mother highly approves. I am the stumbling-block."

"Does she know he was coming to-day?"

"Dear goose, do you suppose I knew?"

Margaret is tall and beautiful, with the hair I love, — brown with red lights in it, — and her colouring is warm and rich, without being dark, and her eyes wonderful depths of colour, soft, soft like pansies, and she is splendidly made and vigorous and healthy. She is, above all things, a hero worshipper.

She must have thought I was very easily taken in, and I was sorry for the young man, yet he looked happy enough. It was a glorious evening, and it had been a day for lovers, for happiness, for joy. Not a cloud in the sky! Too bright a sunshine might sometimes, I thought, be almost pitiless.

I dropped Margaret and the Howards, and was driving slowly on when I passed the Mangles, carrying a parcel and a penny balloon.

"What luck, Mrs. Mangle?"

"Not much this time, thank you, miss."

"I would offer you a lift, but it 's so slow. But your parcel?"

"It 's for Mrs. Barley, thank you, miss. We 're just

going to drop it there, and this," she said with pride, "is for Baby."

She released the balloon on its yard of string so that I should see how beautifully it bobbed.

"We like the walk after the train, thank you, miss."

I drove on, envying the encumbrance her balloon. I still loved them then.

I had nearly reached home when I met men running and children running and, more slowly, women running.

I drew up. One woman, too old to run, stopped.

"Is n't it awful, miss?"

"What?" I said.

"The Mangles' baby, and they so set on her, poor souls. Run over — dead when they picked her up." She wrung her hands.

"Don't go, miss. It 's not for you to see."

"Stop them!" I cried. But I knew it was too late.

A day for lovers, I thought, not a cloud in the sky. Sunshine can sometimes be pitiless.

"A note from Great Popham, miss," said Jane that evening. There were traces of tears on her face. She had held the encumbrance in her arms, only that morning, alive.

"Is the man waiting?" I asked.

"I dare say he is, miss," which was indicative of Jane's mood. The young man had no place in her affections. Her heart was full of the encumbrance.

The note was from Lady Victoria.

"Do tell me, did Guy Lindsay really join you at the picnic? Margaret is so tiresome and mysterious. I have the best reasons for wishing to know. I cannot imagine why I was blessed with daughters. I don't understand girls; they bore me. So do husbands, for the matter of that. I used to pity women with plain girls, now I know they are to be envied. Castlemary is clamouring to come down, but what is the use of distracting Margaret? Guy Lindsay is the better match of the two. I am trying to do the correct mother, although I love an Irishman and should thoroughly enjoy being married to Castlemary myself. Margaret with all her beauty is n't really comfortable to live with. Ought I to tell men so? The question is, How long is a man conscious of his wife's beauty? They get awfully accustomed to the plain ones, don't they? Did Margaret crush Guy? Come up to-morrow."

I wrote back that Margaret did not crush Guy.

I believe Jane handed the note to the messenger in silence. There was unreality in Margaret and her lovers.

The Mangles without their baby! This seemed life, grim, terrible, and tragic.

Poor Mrs. Mangle was beside herself, as the village expressed it. Then with dumb resignation she took up her life again, and said they must look for work.

I offered to advertise for her.

"If you would be so kind, miss. People are kind,

no one has reason to know it better than what we do. The flowers were lovely, were n't they, miss, and real shop flowers? She did love flowers, did n't she, miss?"

I nodded.

"I can see her little hands —"

"I know, I know, Mrs. Mangle; 'excellent cook' shall I put?"

"Good cook, please, miss, and first-class butler, or whatever you think best, miss."

I wrote out the advertisement.

"There, Mrs. Mangle."

She read it. She paused. Her lip trembled.

"Put — 'no encumbrance' — please, miss."

I wrote "no encumbrance."

As I walked home, I looked up at the blue sky, and it reminded me of the encumbrance, with her blue eyes and her blue pinafore. I could see her sitting on the doorstep, in the sunshine. High up in the hedge — caught on a bramble — something fluttered.

It was all that remained of the balloon.

The encumbrance had been spared that sorrow!

XVIII

It had been a promise of long standing that I should take Miss Dorinda to London for a day's shopping — some day.

It was not a thing I had entered into lightly, but with grim determination, and a certain amount of resignation.

It was all finally arranged when she and Miss Agatha came over to luncheon; which happened to be on a day that was cool in the morning, and which turned out to be very hot in the afternoon. This change in the climate necessitated a change in their plans. It was decided that they must stay until it was cool again, on account of the pony.

"We should never have started if we had known," said Miss Agatha.

"The pony would not have started, either," said Miss Dorinda.

If Miss Dorinda had not been so lavish with her praise of the beauty of my border, I might have put off the shopping indefinitely; but for a woman with a border of her own to be so unstinting in her praise of another's deserved some recognition. Besides which, I had an idea that Sister Agatha was in rather a stern mood.

At luncheon Miss Dorinda announced her intention of dressing more gaily in future. "God meant us to,

because look at the birds," she said, "with their beautiful plumage."

I, without thinking, suggested that it was only the cocks that were gay. Miss Dorinda was so crushed and Miss Agatha so derisive that I was determined Miss Dorinda should have the day of her life. It was all arranged quite quietly between our two selves. We were to drive to the station in the village fly. It was to fetch Miss Dorinda first, and was then to pick me up. I promised to be ready.

"Of course, as you know," I said, "there is no one in London."

"No one?"

"Well, what we are accustomed to describe as no one; a few millions only."

"The shops will be open?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, dear, it's for shopping I'm going, and I thought I would take this opportunity of buying Margaret a wedding present."

"She isn't engaged."

"No, but I am told it is imminent, and it is a chance, thanks to you, dear, I may not have again."

"But it depends so much on who she is going to marry."

"Not entirely, dear; a toast-rack, for instance, is suitable alike to a ducal mansion or a rectory."

"Yes, but a duke would be likely to have toast-racks."

"Well, dear, I have heard of no duke in connec-

tion with Margaret. There is Lord Castlemary, but Irish peers never have too much of anything, do they?"

I supposed not.

"I should not like," she said, "to give a present that would be put in the spare room."

"I am sure Margaret would never put your present in the spare room."

"Young people are very spirited nowadays; one never can tell."

The fly was ordered, and when it drove up to my door a few days later, through its window looked the little face of Miss Dorinda, pink with excitement.

"Not all over, dear?" she asked with trepidation, when I said she was so pretty and pink.

"No, no; just here and there," and kissed her on both cheeks, which she calls a French kiss.

"I put on my grey silk," she said. "Is it correct?"

I said I thought grey silk was always correct.

"We are going in an omnibus, are we not?" she said.

"Certainly."

"I have never been in one. You are sure you know where they go?"

I said I was quite sure.

When we were about a mile from the station Miss Dorinda opened her purse and took out her share of the fly money.

We had sternly agreed upon equal shares. I had

secretly determined that they should not be quite equal, but that Miss Dorinda was not to suspect.

For the rest of the mile she held her share of the fly money in her left hand, and with the other hand she took out the money for the railway fare.

I suggested paying for everything and halving the expenses at the end of the day. But she was horrified.

"My dear child, impossible! It must — to begin with — come out of separate compartments. There is the 'expense' compartment. That is at the right-hand side of the purse, and the 'present' compartment is at the left. The division for gold is in the middle. Ten shillings of that is going towards the left compartment, and the rest is for shopping."

So the fly share was paid out of the right-hand compartment, held in the left hand, and the ticket — well, that was held in the other hand and paid out of the — it was quite simple really, and it is stupid of me not to remember.

What was left of both hands went towards solving the difficulty of holding up the grey silk at a sufficient height, without running any risk of showing — "You know what, dear Christian!"

I told her it was quite all right.

There was a young man in the compartment — of the train, I mean. He made her very nervous in the tunnel. But she told me afterwards that as I was with her she did n't put up her umbrella. Did n't I think it would have been a good plan, supposing she had been alone?

I said, yes, if she had remembered to put it down in time.

When we got out at Vauxhall I suggested taking a cab and driving to a more interesting part of London.

This she agreed to, and we took a cab to Sloane Street, where it was arranged we should get into a 'bus.

When we reached Sloane Street, Miss Dorinda said it was certainly a very interesting part of London.

Not the least interesting thing was a man selling groundsel. It was very sad, too, and it touched Miss Dorinda profoundly, for one thing because the groundsel was green and reminded her so of the country, and for another thing because the man looked so poor. "There can't be much profit on groundsel, dear Christian!"

To comfort her I told her the story of Jim Howard, whose father sent him as a present two lizards. Jim, who was at school, wrote to his father, "Thank you for the lizards. I have sold them at the most enormous p-r-o-p-h-e-t."

Miss Dorinda said she did n't suppose this man had a father, and that it seemed unkind to refuse to buy groundsel without saying why.

"One moment, dear Christian, let me explain!"

She approached the man, and said, "I am sorry I cannot buy your groundsel. I live in the country, and my little bird is dead."

"May God help you, lady," said the man.

Miss Dorinda was very much astonished, and, when she had sufficiently recovered from the shock, touched.

"He must have misunderstood me, dear. He must have thought I said something else."

"Your husband, perhaps," I suggested.

"My dear Christian," she said, getting very pink, "he could not have thought that." Then after a moment, "Besides, Christian dear, a husband has nothing to do with groundsel."

"But a widow might buy some."

"If she had the heart to, dear."

In the end I persuaded her that the man was probably Irish, which would account for everything, and at that we left it.

Then we waited for our 'bus.

"Does an omnibus go from here to Piccadilly Circus?" she asked a conductor.

"Three a minute," he answered, which gave her a shock.

One felt he might have broken it more gently.

We got into a 'bus, choosing one not crowded, as Miss Dorinda could not sit close to any but a certain sort of people, and then only if she knew them very well.

When the conductor said "Fares, please," Miss Dorinda placed her hand on my knee, and said, "Let me explain."

Then to the conductor, "We may want to go a little way or we may want to go far. If it rains, for instance —"

"Where to, please, lady?" he said, craning his neck and looking at me, ignoring Miss Dorinda.

It was not good manners. Miss Dorinda put it down to the want of a refining home influence.

I gave him a penny, and Miss Dorinda did the same with immense dignity.

"We 'll pay so far," I said to her, "and if we go on we can pay more."

She bowed.

"If you should see a toast-rack, dear, you will kindly tell the young man to stop."

I saw what looked like one, or rather the shop looked likely, and I asked the conductor to stop, which he did.

"But not for some time after you spoke, dear," said Miss Dorinda, looking at me with the reproachful eyes of a spaniel.

She preferred policemen, she said, to conductors — this as a tribute to the policeman who had piloted her across the street at Knightsbridge.

She was charmed with the manners of the shopmen, and they showed the greatest interest in the wedding present.

"Let me explain," she said, laying her hand on my arm.

"The young lady is not yet engaged, but it is imminent, and I take this opportunity as I do not come often to town." Turning to me, "It is not, dear, like buying mourning before a person is dead, is it?"

"Not in the very least."

The shopman in his servile enthusiasm was about to show Miss Dorinda a canteen of solid silver, but she stopped him and said, "It 's a small present."

"Quite so, madam; they mostly are nowadays."

After much parleying, Miss Dorinda, skirting perilously near Margaret's name, but, always stopping just short of disclosure, finally chose the toast-rack, and said she would take it.

"One moment — will it hold six pieces?"

"Six pieces, madam? Certainly — ample accommodation."

"Now, dear Christian!" — this to me.

"I thank you," — this to the shopmen, and bows all round.

We walked up Regent Street. Miss Dorinda trembled at the wickedness of this, and looked neither to the right nor to the left.

As we walked along a man came up behind me with, I thought, something to sell, and I said, "No, thank you."

He persisted, and I said, "Not to-day, thank you."

He still murmured, and I repeated, "Really not to-day, thank you," in my firmest and kindest manner. As he still went on I looked round and saw, to my horror, that he was offering me the entire trimming of my own hat!

As Jane says, a light touch is n't everything, although it may be French!

I said to Miss Dorinda that I hoped I had thanked the excellent young man.

She said, "You squealed! And he was n't a poor man at all."

The only thing to do was to go into a shop and re-trim my hat. This I did with the assistance of an Italian.

We chose, in our confusion, a Venetian glass shop. But foreigners are very sympathetic, and it transpired that this particular one was engaged to a milliner. He held the pins and sighed for his lady love. She would no doubt have been very useful. And possibly she would not have put the trimming back on my hat, hind part before, as I did.

"My dear," said Miss Dorinda, "you may trust me that this painful episode shall go no further. It was a terrible experience, dear, being spoken to by a man, and the trimming!"

I comforted her by pointing out that it was n't so bad as a total abstainer's hat trimming being blown down the area of a public-house.

"What things you think of, Christian!"

"But it happened, and I trimmed the hat."

"Well, you did n't do it on purpose; so you must n't worry."

Another thing that shook Miss Dorinda to the centre of her being was the sight of an old lady walking up Regent Street, dragging a chain with a collar attached to it, in the vain supposition that inside the collar was the neck of her dear little dog.

Where, oh where, was the dog?

As we drove to the station, after a day too full of

quiet excitements to be worthy of description, Miss Dorinda gave a gasp and a little cry of despair. "I must have held my purse the wrong way round and taken the expenses out of the left-hand compartment, as it comes that way, dear Christian, if the purse is held wrong. But as there is very little left, it does not matter so much. But the carelessness!"

She was difficult to comfort, and she was very tired, but on the whole very happy. Parcels of various shapes lay in the rack above our heads, those more precious on the seat.

I was taking a last look out of the window. Miss Dorinda thought I was trying to prevent people coming in, although she was pleased to say that my face might be an inducement to the contrary, when hurrying along the platform came Margaret, beautiful Margaret, with Lord Castlemary in close attendance.

This would be almost too much excitement for my companion.

However, it was evident that Margaret did not wish to see me. Lord Castlemary certainly had eyes only for her.

He stood at the door of the compartment next to ours, and he was using all his Irish eloquence to persuade Margaret.

Now and then I heard her little laugh, which to an unsuccessful lover must be very exasperating. I thought of Guy Lindsay.

"Do you see anything, dear?" said Miss Dorinda. "No man will come in, I hope."

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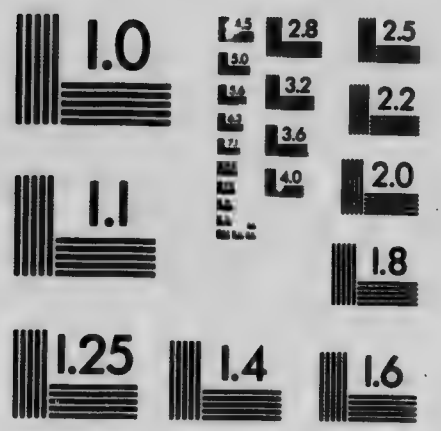

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"I don't think so."

So she settled down, little thinking that next door was being enacted what Little Popham would give its eyes to see and its ears to hear. I wondered if Lady Victoria knew.

The train started and Lord Castlemary was left on the platform, and by the look in his eyes I was almost certain he had failed to persuade Margaret.

At Clapham Junction, the first stop, to my surprise in stepped Margaret.

"I thought I caught sight of you at Waterloo; may I come in?"

"If you don't mind travelling second."

"Not in the least, much nicer than being alone. I 've been shopping. I went up to buy a present for Castlemary's sister. She has hundreds of presents, so many duplicates, poor dear! I hope when I am married people will spare me that."

"What has she most of?" ventured Miss Dorinda.

"Candlesticks" — the cloud passed from Miss Dorinda's face; "and toast-racks of all dull things!"

Margaret leaned back and closed her eyes, and Miss Dorinda turned away to hide the tears in hers.

Her stricken little face was more than I could bear.

I wrote on the margin of the evening paper, "Don't scream when I speak to you in the tunnel," and handed it to Margaret when she awoke.

There is lots of time in the Guildford tunnel, as any nervous woman will know. Miss Dorinda says she can

count up to two hundred and twenty quite slowly, and in that time terrible things might happen. Anyhow there was plenty of time for me to whisper the state of affairs to Margaret, and by the spasmodic squeeze she gave my hand I knew she felt sorry about the toast-rack.

"You must put it right somehow," I whispered. Another squeeze and out of the tunnel we steamed.

Margaret was wide awake, and she said, "I was too sleepy before to tell you such interesting things about Aileen O'Mora's presents. It is the strangest thing; she adores toast-racks."

I shuddered; this was crude, dreadfully crude. "But curiously enough the man she is marrying has so many he does n't know what to do with them. When his uncle died — a most eccentric man — they discovered all sorts of secret rooms in the castle. One was full of candlesticks, of every shape and form; china, glass, ormulu, gun-metal, brass, and everything imaginable. Another full of tiaras, absolutely full. Another full of toast-racks, from floor to ceiling, stacked. Twenty thousand!"

"Twenty thousand," gasped Miss Dorinda.

"Twenty thousand," said Margaret. "So of course Aileen does n't want any more, otherwise it 's the very thing she wanted; I should, I know. There are never enough at Great Popham. I think every one at meals should have their own, and every bedroom. Because it is n't a very nice idea using other people's toast-racks, is it?"

Miss Dorinda was smiling. I was quite flushed; so was Margaret. She had every reason to be.

She made much of Miss Dorinda, very prettily. She has a charming manner, and her voice is caressing, and Miss Dorinda seemed quite pleased. Anyhow, when we parted, she said she had enjoyed her day immensely.

"Dear Christian," she said, holding my hand, "you know you can trust me with regard to the Regent Street episode. I shall never tell."

I had every intention of telling every one. "And dear child," she added, "when did you tell Margaret about the toast-rack?"

She patted my hand.

I watched the little grey figure pass through the door, and the parcels were handed out, and I waved and she waved.

The long-looked-for day was over. Is there ever a day that is entirely satisfactory?

XIX

Then Angela came to stay with the Howards, and I confess to a certain amount of interest, if not curiosity, in seeing her. From what I had gathered, she was very rich, very gay, not too happy, with a husband she was wont to name with a sigh.

Aunt Augusta said one could not have everything, which is quite true, but I think that what one chooses one's self might at least be bearable. But, of course, Angela did not choose him.

I got a note asking me to go up to luncheon the day after Angela arrived, and I went.

As I passed the schoolroom window, Pat shouted to me to come in. I went in, knowing it was contrary to regulations; but somehow or other regulations are not so stringent at the Howards as to make infringing them a very great crime; moreover, Pat had called—that was sufficient.

I found the little party rather glad, I thought, of an interruption.

Peggy was doing "jography."

Jack was writing a copy, in which his tongue played an arduous part; and Baby, poor Baby, was very bored over her letters.

Miss Mole made a mark with a knitting needle on the margin of the geography book, and said, "Sit up, Pat."

"I am," said he.

"Don't yawn, Jack."

Now Jack has a reason for everything and is a stickler, and he talks slowly, with an emphasis that gives a certain point to his remarks.

"W-hy did G-od give m-e a yawn if I m-ay n't use it?"

Miss Mole did not answer that question.

"Are you tired, Miss Mole?" I said.

"Moley-poley 's never tired, worse luck," sighed Pat.

"Don't you like lessons, Pat?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, I like them all right, sometimes."

"B-aby chose a s-ugar c-ake on her birfday and a whole h-oliday, and P-at chose d-ouble lessons and a p-lain ginger c-ake," announced Jack, which was a long speech for him and showed very plainly what he thought of Pat.

We laughed and this encouraged him.

"M-oley-p-oley is g-oing to be m-arried."

"Jack, that is not a subject that interests any one, and little boys should not talk of things they don't understand."

"S-hall you have ch-ildren w-hen you are m-arried?"

Moley-poley grew very pink.

"Father says he 's a brave man," said Pat.

There was a pause, and Moley-poley grew pinker still, and I jumped to the conclusion that she was going to marry a soldier. It was afterwards explained that his bravery lay in the fact that he was a bank clerk.

We changed the subject after I had wished Miss Mole every happiness, and she had thanked me, and added with hesitation in her voice, "I shall hate leaving here. I 'm not sure that I 'm doing the wise thing, but one must think of one's future. I can't imagine being happy anywhere else."

"They are dear children," I said.

"Yes, and Mrs. Howard."

There were tears in her eyes, and I wondered why she risked the bank clerk.

There was her future to think of, but why did the bank clerk ignore his? Why should the safety of a woman's future lie in the wrecking of a man's?

Jane says if every one was wise as regards marriage the world would come to an end.

"Of course," continued Miss Mole, "I can't expect this atmosphere; William has n't been brought up to it. He has some nice relations, but I don't think he often sees them. Mrs. Montague is staying here." In her voice I detected a note of envy. Angela's future was so firmly assured.

"Her two little girls are here, too; they are such ladylike children."

"Are they?" I said, and I wondered what ladylike children could be.

"You like Kitty and Dolly, don't you, children?" said Miss Mole.

"Which do you like best, Pat?" I asked.

"Dolly," he said, with great decision.

"You used to like Kitty best," said Miss Mole.

"I don't now; I 'm going to — "

Here Baby rushed up very fussed, and nudged Pat. Then putting her arms round my neck, whispered, "Mummy says Pat must n't talk about his marriage at pwesent."

Pat stood corrected, first on one leg and then on the other.

"All right, Baby," he said. "I forgot."

Baby fussed and frowned and was very important.

I picked up Pat's book in which he was writing, and read, "What do you know of the Spanish Armada?"

He had written, "The Spanish Armada is a thing all children learn about in their lessons."

It seemed to me that Pat was destined to go far.

"I 'm going to see Cousin Angela now," I said.

"She 's in the D-roindrum," announced Jack; and there I found her, — pretty, effusive, auburn-haired, tired, disillusioned, affected, beautifully dressed, and many other things.

She had gone, one could see, in worldly things, much deeper than her beautiful cousin, and she had come back from her ex[illegible] into knowledge with very little belief in the [illegible] of people in general. Or, perhaps, Mrs. How[illegible] gone deeper, deep enough to find the good tha[illegible]t the bottom of most of us.

Angela Montague was enthusiastic over her cousin's beauty, and the only deep feeling she showed for any one was for her. Even her little girls bored her, and so long as their stockings were long enough and their petticoats short enough and their legs thin enough, she

was content to let them alone. A child with fat legs, she told me, would have killed her.

"After the baby stage, I mean, of course. Women's legs are of such importance, don't you think so?"

I said I thought of the very greatest, and to plain women a source sometimes of infinite consolation.

Angela maintained that Mary amused her immensely, and how could she live like this!

"Not that it is n't all delightful, darling, but are you never bored?"

We were at luncheon, and she slipped her hand along the table and took Mrs. Howard's.

"You beautiful thing, what you might have made of your life!"

She talked a great deal, dropping bits of gossip from a world which was strange to us all, except to Miss Mole, who seemed to know all about it.

It was a world in which all women were foolish and all men worse, or the other way round.

It was amusing, in a way, to this country mouse, but she wondered, was it worth while? Like the powder on Angela's nose, it all seemed so unnecessary.

So Pat thought, for he looked at her for some time, and then said, "D' you know, I think your nose is going mouldy!"

"What a delicious child," she said, which to my mind showed her to be a true woman of the world, although surreptitiously she corrected the over-use of powder a moment later.

Our beautiful Margaret came in for discussion, and

we were told that Lord Castlemary did n't really care for her, or if he did, it was no use. It was a well-known thing that there were other attractions; no doubt he would —

Here Mrs. Howard said, "Grace, Peggy darling," and what Lord Castlemary would do if h could we did not hear. I did not wish to, so convinced was I that he really did care for Margaret.

After luncheon I went out with Angela, and I found her most expansive. She told me many of her troubles and anxieties, so many of which were of her own making — all of them, if one went back to her marriage. She told me a great deal about her Cousin Mary, for whom she felt a very deep love mixed with a feeling of despair.

"No one else so beautiful could be so good."

We argued that out, not to its conclusion, because our time was restricted and Angela had her opinions firmly established, and I, mine. But we talked.

"You know, I hate saying things against people — girls especially — but Margaret's mother ought to know Castlemary travelled down with her from London the other day, and he is notoriously —"

"Margaret travelled with me," I said.

"Really, what nasty things people say, don't they?"

"They do."

"But how do you know which day I meant?"

"Because she has only been up to town once lately."

I ventured that, in so good a cause, and it turned out to be right.

"Great-uncle William used to talk to you about Mary, I suppose?"

"By the hour; it was one of my greatest treats, and I have woven round her stories of romance ever since."

"You must have been quite young then."

"I was. I spent a holiday here when my people were in India. I lodged with Jane's sister."

"Who is Jane?"

"She was my maid then, and is now many things. When I was left more or less alone in the world I took my cottage here, and I have lived here ever since."

"More or less alone? How much more, how much less?"

"Well, altogether alone really."

"How funny it must be to have no relations."

"I have cousins, of course. But an only child, or practically an only child is very often without many near relations."

"Practically an only child?"

"I have a sister."

"Oh, some one was talking about you the other day. Sir Wallace Hampden, I think. Would it be? Absurd creature, he is really desperately in love with Margaret. Men are so vain. Imagine thinking for one moment that Margaret would marry him. She might, of course; one never can tell."

She then returned to the subject of Mary H[illegible] for which I was grateful.

She told me a great deal about Mary's coming to

London, her success, her engagement, Aunt Augusta's anger, and she ended with "I believe Mary was right, after all."

"I am quite sure she was."

"But still she might have married any one."

"She might, but she was spared."

"I mean she might have made a very good marriage."

"Well, I think she did."

"As it turns out, but people ought not to marry and expect miracles to happen."

"What would life be without them?"

"Do you expect miracles?"

"Every day of my life."

"How deliciously young of you. I wish you would come and stay with us. I believe my husband would like you."

"I am such a country mouse."

"You would look quite nice if you were properly dressed."

I looked at Angela. She was quite serious. I looked at my thick brown boots and my short tweed skirt. I was conscious of my headgear, but still, it was a little severe and reminded me of Mr. Gray, curate, who once asked me if there had been many beauties at a ball I had been to. When I said, "No one in particular," he said, "Then you must have been quite a belle."

I was satisfied with even that amount of praise, and I don't know why he should have proceeded

to put it right; but he did, in the following manner: —

"I mean it, though — you were Anyhow, I mean, you would have been in any case; I mean — that if there had been beauties, you would still have been! I mean — some one only said the other day, why did n't you marry? What I really meant was startling beauties, like, you know — London beauties?"

I was laughing too much to help him out, and we parted friends. He turned at the gate, and said, "You know what I mean."

XX

I FIND that working in the garden does not mean that I am "not at home." In Jane's eyes, at all events.

She thinks it is good for me to see people; so with that in her mind she opens the garden door and announces a visitor, very often to the flowers alone, and the visitor is then left to find me. Mr. Dare found me one day. He said he wanted to see me very particularly.

I hurriedly reviewed in my mind any church indiscretion of which I could conceive myself guilty. Had I failed, as a churchwoman, in my duty? Horrible suspicion.

I asked him to take a seat. There was to choose from, a wheelbarrow, an inverted flower-pot, and the comfortable part of a garden roller.

But he suggested going indoors. He laid his finger on his lips and smiled at some inquisitive-looking pansies. Whether he meant that they were listening I don't know. Very likely they were, in spite of the innocent look on their upturned faces. I never do trust anything as innocent looking as a pansy. It can't be for nothing that they were given those faces, if we are to believe that Nature does nothing without a wise purpose.

I imagined that what Mr. Dare had to say was of

such importance that it necessitated the precaution of telling it behind closed doors.

I went in. He followed. I hung my scissors on a nail, put down my basket and gloves, and ushered him into my sitting-room. He sat down and smelt a rose which was in a vase on the table at his elbow. "How delicious!" he said.

"There was no reason the pansies should not have heard that," I said.

He smiled.

"They must learn not to be jealous," I went on, giving him time to prepare the attack, for an attack I imagined it was going to be.

"Of course, of course, I was going to ask if you — have you any influence with Mrs. Howard?"

"With Mrs. Howard?" I said.

"Yes, with Mrs. Howard." He tapped his pince-nez against his thumb-nail, as he spoke, and looked very seriously at my ceiling.

"I cannot imagine that I can have any influence with Mrs. Howard. I love her, and that even sounds presumption, when you know how short a time I have known her."

"It is excusable," he said.

"In what way do you want me to influence her? She knows lots of rich people, — is that what you mean? — and well-known people."

"Far from it, my dear Miss Hope! Have you the power to dissuade her from injuring those she would benefit?"

"Mrs. Howard injure any one?" I said.

My voice must have expressed the astonishment I felt.

"Yes, injure," he said.

"I cannot imagine how such a thing could be possible."

"There is a great deal of harm done in the name of charity."

"It is very discouraging, is n't it?" I said.

"You are quite naturally surprised, and I must explain myself. I am put here in this village, not, I consider, by man, but by God, and to Him I feel I am answerable for the good of my people. My way may be wrong, but I can only live up to what I believe and feel to be right.

"Whether I have been successful in my ministration to my people, is a matter, as I said before, between God and myself. At times I am disheartened by their seeming ingratitude, or indifference rather. They don't come to church as I would wish; they neglect the sacraments; they frequent public-houses; they are generally immoral. Forgive me for mentioning such a subject; it strengthens my point."

"What has Mrs. Howard done?" I said.

He hummed and hawed, and he put on his glasses. He took them off again. He evidently found it difficult to begin.

"Tell me one or two things."

"Well, to begin with the least of the injudicious things, I learn that she pays Betsy Marker's rent!"

"Betsy has two and sixpence a week and is very old, Mr. Dare, and very feeble."

"But she has lived up to now paying her rent. Why pauperize her now?"

I said nothing, and he went on: "We have always been very kind to Betsy. She *has* a belief in prayer. It is a pity to destroy it. She says help always does come."

"Yes, but think what it must be to pray and always — wait. A certainty must be so delightful."

"Miss Hope, discipline, discipline!"

I nodded. There were tears in my eyes, I knew, so I looked down. I saw proof positive that even gloves do not keep one's hands quite clean, gardening. Then my hands became blurred.

Why had n't I long ago paid dear Betsy's rent, instead of doing things at odd times?

"Then," he went on, "she has given the Faring children new clothes. Their rags were a disgrace. Their parents are absolutely undeserving. They never do a stroke of work, and never will. I have talked till I am tired."

"But the children were in rags," I said.

"They were, because of the worthlessness of their parents. In clothing the children you countenance culpable negligence on the part of the parents."

I nodded.

"I wish we could teach you dear ladies to be wise in your charity. Mrs. Howard sent Billy Wurzle up to a London Hospital — took him herself — regardless of Dr. Durnford's feelings."

"Did Dr. Durnford say so?" I asked.

"Oh, no! he never would; in fact, so far as I know he has not mentioned the matter. But my wife says doctors feel these things. One must have tact!"

"But it is a great thing for Billy to get the best advice, isn't it?"

"Undoubtedly, but there is a way to do these things. It amounts, almost, to a reflection on Lady Victoria."

"And?" I said.

"There is Lottie."

He paused. "It is a subject on which I hardly like to speak to you."

"One cannot live in the village and be blind to it," I said.

"One can refuse to see evil, Miss Hope."

"Isn't it better to see it and overcome it?"

Mr. Dare waved his hand, as much as to say, "It's gone!"

"Well, in that case, Mrs. Howard, out of the kindness of her heart, I am sure, has behaved with the very gravest indiscretion. I met Lottie yesterday; she was smiling. When my wife last saw her she was quite different. She appeared then to fully realise her position. It does not do to encourage these things. They must be firmly dealt with."

"They always have been by you and Mrs. Dare?" I ventured.

"Always."

"Then, why? I mean — there 's Lottie and Milly, and, well, several, all quite lately."

"Yes, yes, I blame myself. It is pitiful, pitiful. We have not been stern enough; my wife is quite right. It takes a woman to understand these things. It was she who pointed out to me the harm Mrs. Howard was doing — unconsciously — of that I am sure. I have never met a more charming woman. Well, well, the danger of being influenced by beauty is a very real one. Thank you, thank you, Miss Hope!"

I let him out, and waiting for him was Mrs. Dare.

"Well?" I heard her say, as they walked away.

I know the tyranny that one word can be in married life, and I knew that it was Mrs. Dare and not her husband who deplored the influence of Mrs. Howard.

It takes a woman to understand these things!

Mrs. Dare had what I call a terra-cotta mind. All pinks to her were buff, and all reds terra-cotta.

I am sure there is more in a sense of colour than people know.

I, then, was to influence Mrs. Howard against — what?

Clothing the ragged children.

Bringing health to the sick.

Hope to the sinners and sinned against.

Well, Mrs. Dare had set me a hard task.

Helping the o[illegible] as "pauperizing."

Clothing ragged children was "encouraging sloth in parents."

Bringing health to the sick was a breach of medical etiquette.

Bringing hope to the Lotties of this world was encouraging sin.

I had not even begun to solve these terrible problems when I heard a knock at the door. A minute later Mrs. Durnford asked if I was at home.

"Dear Miss Hope, I thought I must run in and tell you the splendid news about Billy Wurzle. That dear, dear Mrs. Howard took him up to London to a hospital, and there seems every chance of his getting all right. Dr. Durnford is delighted. He made a very fair diagnosis too, up to a point, which of course pleases him. The doctors told Mrs. Howard that Billy could not have been better treated. There 's praise for a poor country doctor who does n't get over much. Of course, we are bound to get a bit behind in the country. Dr. Durnford has been trying, for ages, to get the Wurzles to let Billy go up, but they are so frightfully ignorant and pig-headed and so against hospitals. But Mrs. Howard did it in a minute. Her smile would melt a brick wall, I 'm sure.

"I don't know what it is, but things seem so different since the Howards came to the village. It all seems so hopeful, does n't it? D' you know, Miss Hope, what I think we want more of? Love, and not to be afraid to say so! I told Dr. Durnford so this morning, and he said it could be overdone. But then he 's always cautious."

I could have kissed Mrs. Durnford, and it would

have been a good way of hiding my smile, under the brim of her speckley sailor hat. But I did n't want to scare her. I remembered her saying once that if any one wanted to kiss her, she would like to be warned first.

XXI

One of the next excitements was the departure of Miss Mole to be married, with half a dozen of everything — so Nannie said — and the greater excitement of the arrival of Mademoiselle.

The excitement of the Mademoiselle at Great Popham was a thing dangerous to live with. So Cynthia said, and I can quite believe it. So should I be excited, if I lived in France and an Englishwoman came within calling distance.

Mrs. Durnford says it would depend on the woman. I maintain that it would entirely depend on myself.

The Howard children were very much occupied with Mademoiselle. For the first few days after she came I saw very little of them, and nothing of Mademoiselle.

I had a strong suspicion that they were seeing what she was made of. The tests, I knew, would include stile-climbing, stream-wading, cow-meeting, and various things to a mademoiselle anathema. I was on the point of going in at my door one afternoon, when running up behind me came a voluble female in a tartan blouse and a boat-shaped hat.

Seeing that she was agitated and guessing her to be Mademoiselle, I made haste to open the door and offer her refuge.

"O mon Dieu!" she exclaimed. "What 'ave I not suffered! 'ow I have run and run! Madame, she

said to me, 'Go out for a leetle walk without the children, for a rest.' And what do I meet? But worse dan twenty tousand children! One, two, dree bulls, cows, what d'you call dem? One was fierce, like this!" and she made a jump at me, so sudden and ferocious, that I jumped too and collided with the sticks and umbrellas, which, clattering down, took with them the cow bell which summons me to my meals.

Out rushed Jane of course, and picked us up.

Well, we quieted down and I ordered coffee. I took Mademoiselle in and pacified her by degrees.

"It is you, den," she said, "who are de vunderful Miss Op, de noble creature, that I 'ear nuttin' else of! You speak French, mademoiselle?"

I said I did, but not nearly so well as she did English. It took a little time to convince her of that truth. In any case I found there was no necessity for me to speak any language. I had only to listen.

She described to me her arrival — first of all, at the station. "It was almos' dark, but not too dark to see approachin' me a lady, really charming and gracieuse. It was madame herself. Here was something really delightful. I felt no longer sad and lonely. The weather it was 'orrible, but dat is England, par exemple. Madame is truly ravissante, of a beauty so extreme that it is astonishing; but to return!

"She asked of the porter, my luggage, in such a way as to surprise me. But he was calm; he went about his work calm and quiet, and I said to myself, What sort of a man is this, to stand so calm when so

addressed? But it is natural, else would no one in the house have any sense. I cannot keep calm when madame speaks to me, ça viendra!

"To return, madame she begged of me to excuse the carriage.

"She said it was the village—comment dit on?—Fé-lai?"

"Fly," I said.

"C'est ça, madame said they themselves had only two ponies. Mon Dieu! those ponies. You know them?"

I nodded. I knew them well.

"Eh bien, madame, she talked amiably of France, and she made me feel no longer a stranger in the land. Then we arrived; it was all bright and light, and mon Dieu! the meeting with their mother, these children, as if it was seven years she had been away! Very certainly, they are not cold — these English!

"Then madame, she took me by the hand and she says in a voice tout à fait caressante, 'Piggay, this is Mademoiselle. You must try to make up to her for all she has left in France,' or some words like that, very astonishing!

"A little girl altogether beautiful gave me the hand, and smiling she says, 'I 'ope you will be 'appy, Mademoiselle!'

"Then comes a leetle, a quite leetle boy, si mignon, and he says, 'You may clean my dormice, if you like.'

"Figurez vous! Mademoiselle! Then monsieur, so

tall, so kind, magnifique! I said to madame, 'Monsieur il est Baron?' and madame laughed, and she says, 'No.' 'Il est Prince?' But no."

Here Mademoiselle paused for breath, and I said the children were delightful.

Mademoiselle threw up her hands and looked heavenwards.

"Do not imagine, mademoiselle, that they cannot be naughty — these children! I tremble, but they are noble with it all. Then there is staying there a gentleman, and then comes about the pony — the first thing. It seems the gentleman was goin' somewhere! The whole family go somewhere, all the day without stopping for one single minute; and we were all in the hall waiting to see the departure, when — ah, qu'il est drôle! what again is the name? — Sagesse enters and he says, 'The pony is at the door, madame, but nowhere can I find Monsieur Boswell. I 've looked behind the oak chest.' 'Monsieur Boswell,' I say to myself. 'Is there then no end to the people who are in the house? And what has he done that he should hide behind the oak chest?' The gentleman who was about to drive was Monsieur — but I forget the name. It was not Boswell, certainly; that is a name that comes back to me. Then Piggay, she says, 'Oh! I 'm so sorry, he 's on my bed!'

"Monsieur Boswell on the bed of my pupil! Would I not be blamed for this? But madame, she laughed and she says, 'Piggay darling, fetch him.'

"Piggay, she runs and I wait for the man who dares

to do things so unheard of. My pupil, she returns with a book in the hand. 'Here it is,' she says.

"Then madame, she says, 'We keep it to read when the pony won't go. He stops at the corners, and it is no use whipping him. Boswell's "Life of Johnson," — you know it?' Picture to yourself, mademoiselle, what I felt!

"The young man, he laughed and he goes off with the book; and the children — they call out with one voice, 'Don't lose mother's place.'

"That is only some things of this most extraordinary family. But the consideration of madame! It is a thing I have never met! No more, thank you, mademoiselle!"

So really Mademoiselle's first impressions of the Howard family were as fresh as any one's.

I have made a poor attempt at writing it as she pronounced it, but it can easily be imagined and the gesticulations added, by any one who knows a mademoiselle — especially one who has just met a cow, face to face.

"Well, miss," said Jane, when the door had closed on Mademoiselle, "were you hurt?"

"Not a bit, thank you, Jane."

"What scared her so, miss?"

"A cow."

"Mr. Brooke's cows, miss; they're as tame as pump-water. It's something to be born English, miss, is n't it?"

"Something, but I love French people."

"Do you, miss? I suppose if you were born French you 'd get used to it. But I don't see myself choosing it."

"Well, no one does choose it, I suppose."

"Not exactly, miss; anyhow I 'm glad I don't have to talk it."

"If you went to Paris, Jane, you 'd be ashamed if you could n't make yourself understood."

"Not at all, miss. I should be proud of being able to talk a language they could n't!"

XXII

I WONDERED who the young man could be who was staying with the Howards. I went up late the following afternoon and found them all sitting round the smoking-room fire, listening to a man who stood on the hearth-rug. This, evidently, was the young man.

My first thought was that he was not so young as I expected. Later I discovered that he was the youngest person I had ever met.

Mr. Howard was leaning forward in his chair, with the absorbed look I know so well on his face.

Mrs. Howard was looking at him a little anxiously; her eyes were fixed on his face, his on the face of the man who was talking. It was a bright, keen, compelling sort of face, fascinating in a certain boyish way.

Mrs. Howard held out her hand and drew me into the circle. I sat down so quietly that my arrival passed unnoticed, certainly by Mr. Howard, whose eyes were fixed on the face of the tinker and not on the quality of the wares he offered.

The tinker, being a man with an eye to business, noticed me just enough to draw me with a look into the charmed circle, and proceeded to spread out his wares for my especial benefit.

They were golden and glittering, and round them he spun delightful yarns, of treasure known and ac-

cessible to him and one other man, hidden to every one else.

He spoke of golden ornaments worn by natives, as proof positive that there was gold, and gold easily got, so easily as to make expensive machinery unnecessary. It was clever of the tinker, to mark his wares like that, in plain figures.

There were practically mountains of gold and fortunes awaiting those who were lucky enough to get the first foothold into this fairyland. How quick the return, how rich the reward, how certain, how sure!

Mr. Howard leaned further forward in his chair, Mrs. Howard looked a little more anxious, and I began to brace myself against being led away by the tinker. I determined not to think his voice truthful, his manner attractive, and his wares real gold.

Not the least picturesque part of the whole thing was the description of his meeting with the man who, in return for a personal service rendered, had disclosed the secret of this hidden treasure.

And so on he talked until the gong sounded and Wisdom announced dinner, with an aggrieved face, as well it might be, since none of us were dressed, and I had no business to be there at all. But I stayed on, and we all ate little and listened much. By the end of the evening I, too, was looking at the face of the tinker and not at the kettle.

To Mr. Howard, who had travelled, and had the longing still in his blood at times, the call was stirring. The tinker was better at his business than Burridge.

I don't think anything very remarkable happened that evening in the way of meeting savouries in the hall, for instance. There was something a little odd about the pudding, I remember, and when Mr. Howard made some remark about it, Mrs. Howard said: —

"Dearest David, don't say anything; Gabbage had bad news of her sister's brother-in-law this morning."

That was enough; we all ate religiously of the pudding, and we all felt that if Gabbage's hand was so heavy, what must her heart be? The tinker had two helps, which really was rather nice of him. It cost him Wisdom's respect, but showed at least a desire, on his part, to please, and a feeling for the sorrows of others.

Whether he had any ulterior motive, I cannot say. In any case it was no use his counting on the Howards noticing such an act of self-denial, as it seems a habit of theirs to eat a thing for the sake of the cook. And on this occasion if the tinker had not cleared the dish, a member, or perhaps it might have taken two, of the family would undoubtedly have done so, in consideration for the feelings of Gabbage.

It is always supposed that if the dish is a disappointment to them, what must it be to her?

It argues a very rare sense of duty expected of Gabbage?

To Wisdom it is a purely personal matter. One day he said to her: "It 's all very well for you; your responsibility ceases when the pudding leaves the kitchen; but what about me who hands it round?" Gabbage replied, that as she and Wisdom were no relations, not

being married, so to speak, she did n't see where his feelings came in. This remark must have terrified Wisdom, and no wonder!

The tinker's name, by the way, was Melfort, and I gathered that he was staying in London, and from things he said I guessed the name of his club.

During the evening, I made up my mind to write to Randal Grey directly I got home, and ask him to find out all he could about the tinker and his wares. Having done that, would he kindly direct the attention of Mr. Howard from the tinker's face to the bottom of the kettle?

That much I felt I could do. Poppy's fears had filled me with apprehension.

The tinker was really quite a nice person. I went by his face to start with, which was a dangerous and "Howardy" thing to do, and afterwards by the kind way in which he sought to clear my path of stumbling-blocks on our way home through the wood.

Now, since I knew every stick and stone in the wood, and he not one, it ought to have been my place to guide him. But I should imagine no one had ever guided the tinker's footsteps since he had learned to walk.

How he came to be leading me home was one of Mr. Howard's little surprises.

He had various things to do, the tinker nothing. Therefore why should n't he see Miss Hope home?

"You will, won't you?"

What could the poor man say but, Yes, and he said

it with gusto. There was nothing half-hearted about him.

So that was how it came to pass that the tinker and I started off in a darkness lighted by something of a moon.

He insisted that I should take his arm, which I did, as Jane was not there to see and misunderstand. I always think it is best to be natural with people as natural as travelling tinkers, and to take everything as a matter of course. That is a thing I cannot instil into Jane.

"And where are you going to stop, miss? When *can* you show surprise?"

We did not pursue the subject. Jane's imagination had outstepped mine.

It was very natural that the tinker and I should talk of the Howards. I stumbled, not over a stone, but in my astonishment when I heard that his friendship with them was about two days old.

"They are very delightful people," I said.

"Delightful! — Miss Hope!"

We were out of the wood by this time, and the thought struck me, with horror, Was he going to propose?

It was the way he laid his hand on mine that made me think that Jane was perhaps right, after all.

"Miss Hope!"

He stopped. I stopped. He pointed heavenwards. My eyes followed the direction of his finger, and finally alighted on Venus.

"You see that star?"

I breathed again. The kindest person could not liken me to Venus.

"That," he said, "is Mrs. Howard. This" — indicating, with the toe of his boot, the ground — "is me."

So far as I know, there may have been a worm there as well, but for all practical purposes the ground will do.

I agreed that the relative positions were just as they should be.

"And how did you come to meet them?" I asked.

"In a curious way — a very curious way. I came down here, expecting to find Mr. Wallace, her great-uncle, she tells me. He was a very kind friend of mine. The news of his death had not reached me. Very little does reach one in the wilds. I walked into the house, as was my custom in Mr. Wallace's day, and straight into the dining-room. I found every one kneeling down. The first thing I noticed, I am bound to confess, was the extreme beauty of Mrs. Howard. I knelt beside her. It seemed a perfectly natural thing to do. It seems to me to be almost the natural position of any man on first seeing such a face.

"I can't say she bowed to me, but when I knelt beside her, she seemed to welcome me — in a deeply religious manner, of course. Mr. Howard went on reading prayers, and when he had finished, he asked me if I had had breakfast, and gave me to understand that I had only to ask for anything I wanted.

"It was a wonderful experience, and I can't say that I have ever met anything quite like it, anywhere."

I was quite certain the Howards had n't.

"You know, Miss Hope, an experience like that makes one feel at home with people at once."

"Does it?" I said. "I should be so overcome that it would take me a long time to recover. Some people might have been very much embarrassed."

"Surely not?"

"I think, surely, yes!"

"When a man has travelled in every part of the world, there is not much that does surprise him. Even kindness does not overcome me with astonishment as it seems to do some of the people I have met since I came home. The other day I was told of a man who had been so kind to his wife! It was an attitude of mind new to me. Coming from what people are pleased to call uncivilised parts of the world, I should have looked for that in a man. But there, there, one gets out of the way of things. I am a terrible person to go marching in to family prayers, and taking it all as a matter of course. Too bad, too bad!"

I hastened to say that I was sure the Howards loved it, that I was only thinking how funny it would be under some circumstances.

"You think it funny?" he said. "To me it was the most profoundly touching thing I have ever experienced."

So we parted, the tinker and I.

For a moment I stood watching him before I closed

the door. I saw his tall figure swing away into the moonlight, and as he walked he sang what sounded a pæan of praise.

It was only right that a day that had begun with prayer should end with praise.

I did not write to Randal Grey. I felt that the tinker would play fair. And supposing the gold was really there!

Then I went back to the family prayers, and I laughed myself to sleep. I never did that before the Howards came.

The next morning Jane said to me, "You stayed to dinner, then, miss. You got home all right?"

"Quite, thank you."

"You did n't meet a drunken man, miss?"

"No, Jane."

"One went past, singing. I thought it was Burridge back."

"No, not Burridge, but there was a tinker about, I believe."

"How could you tell in the dark, miss? Had he a donkey?"

"I should n't be surprised."

"Well, miss, did you see it?"

"No-o, Jane, I did n't."

"Well, then."

What a shame it was to tease Jane!

XXIII

I LIKE Poppy. Lady Victoria says she does too, and when I say "Of course!" she says, "My dear, it 's anything but of course. It 's a wonder, the wonder of the Victorian age! Is he clever, good-looking, or anything? No, he is n't. But he 's Poppy, and frightfully dependable. For instance, if one is obliged, for reasons of ordinary politeness, to write a letter which one does not want posted — I mean where the fact of writing is the thing — well, give it to Poppy to post. He 'll put it in his pocket and won't post it. You can trust him not to. You see the uses of Poppy's coat-pocket, don't you? It 's an excuse that 's always believed in, is n't it? His man knows better than to look in his pocket, or if he does, he must n't let Poppy know he does."

"But supposing you should want the letter posted?" I said.

"My dear Christian, how dense you are! I don't give it to Poppy."

"A careless footman might answer the same purpose."

"Not at all; because if a footman did such a thing he would, of course, be discharged, whereas the only thing I can discharge about Poppy is my duty towards him.

"He thinks I am clever, which of course is delightful; and he knows he is stupid, which is also a great com-

fort. I can't think why more women don't look for stupidity in a husband — as an asset. It is such a valuable quality and gives one such a free hand. Whatever I suggest I only have to say, 'Even *you*, Poppy, can see the sense of that!' He can't very well say he does n't, because it rather takes the wind out of one's sails when some one says, 'even you,' does n't it? Think, dear Christian, what hundreds of stupid men there are who think themselves clever; that 's too awful. When I said women should look for stupidity in men, I meant a recognised stupidity, and then there is the chance of finding that *rara avis*, a clever man who knows he is stupid. That would be quite too wonderful to live with. Because you would have all the advantages of the cleverness, it would be bound to come out, and yet you would never feel the superiority which is so odious to live with. No, I would n't really change Poppy, although, Christian, I must own that it would be a wonderful thing to enjoy a moonlight drive with one's own husband. Do you suppose there lives a woman who does? Truthfully?"

I said I thought it was quite possible.

"You are an idealist!"

"I can't speak from experience, naturally."

"Poppy's features have come in splendidly for the girls. What is insignificant in a man is all right in a girl. Look at Margaret's nose, for instance! It 's too delicious, is n't it? Which reminds me, she has begun to turn it up at Castlemary. I am sorry; he 's such a dear and so absurd. He 's stupid in exactly the right

sort of way. Margaret 's clever; she takes after me, I suppose.

"Poppy's mother must have been awfully stupid, dear woman. Imagine calling a child Popham who was already Popham. To go through life as Popham Popham of Great Popham! It was enough to stamp any one."

That 's what Lady Victoria thinks of Poppy, more or less. I like him. I call him Poppy behind his back, but to his face, Sir Popham.

Jane announced him one day — it is wonderful how she manages to get out the P's — just as I was sitting down to tea. It was very soon after my visit from Mademoiselle, and he was rather full of her. He was very French, in consequence.

You may have met a very, very English person who gesticulates in a very, very French way, or thinks he does — well, that 's Poppy. His Mademoiselle tells me that he learns three French idioms every day while he is dressing, and the consequence is that his French is very, very English, sprinkled with idioms that are very, very French. He loves telling me how he just failed for the Diplomatic Service. The mere fact of having done so, he evidently thinks, gives him a kind of social *cachet*, and he talks to me with a kind of whimsical discretion of the wickedness of certain European cities. Like lots of simple men, he would like to be thought wicked. Well, in he walked, took his seat at the tea table, and helped himself to jam, with the gusto of a hungry schoolboy.

"Dear Christian," he said, "this is really delightful; not married yet?"

"Not since you were here."

"Ah, it is delightful of you. Not bored? I always say you could be married if you wanted to be."

"That is very kind of you."

"Not at all, not at all. I was saying the same thing to old Franks only yesterday. I never see why people should say a girl can't marry simply because she does n't."

"No, I don't see why, quite."

"People in a village have so little to talk about, have n't they?"

"Well, not much unless you do anything startling or a family like the Howards bursts upon them suddenly."

He smiled; he was pleased, I knew, at the mere possibility of his being thought capable of doing anything surprising.

"Yes, yes, I must be careful. It does n't do. They are charming. Mary Howard, she 's a beauty, is n't she? I always tell Victoria she gives all the other women fits, does n't she? And their Mademoiselle, you 've seen her? She does n't seem at all flighty, does she?"

"Not in the least," I said.

"Not a flirt at all, I should say."

"Oh! not in the least."

"No, that 's a comfort. It does n't do in a village, does it? Such a bad example, is n't it? I hesitated, I re-

member, at bringing a Frenchwoman into the village at all. But our Mademoiselle has been no trouble at all."

"She must be very excited at another mademoiselle coming?" I said.

"Excited, 'pon my word, she 's not safe, so I 'm told; so Cynthia says. She 's been kissing Cynthia ever since she heard there was another Frenchwoman coming. Cynthia can't stand it. She says I might bear the brunt of some of it. That 's Cynthia's joke, of course. I keep out of Mademoiselle's way. The new one 's not pretty, is she? Not a bit; I only saw her for a minute."

"No, not pretty," I said, "but there is always something fascinating to me about Frenchwomen."

"Oh, rather," said Poppy. "That 's the mischief. They 've got a way; they say things one does n't expect. Ours said *I* was *spirituel*, the other day. Of course I turned it off, but I 'm hanged if I know what she meant."

"I think," I said, "broken English is always so fascinating; that alone makes them charming to listen to."

"Yes, that 's it! By the way, that reminds me of a story. Did you hear about Puffin? He 's Peter's boy; he 's got two, Puffin and Billy. Billy 's awfully good and all that, you know — religious. And Puffin, well, he is n't, not a bit. His aunt was reading Bible stories to him, you know, and he looks up at her and says, 'Aunt Molly, you tell those to Billy; he believes them.' Good for six, was n't it?"

"Which reminds me of the story," I said, "of the clerk who telegraphed to his employers the day after a bad fog, 'Sorry cannot come to-day, have not got home yesterday.'"

That again reminded Poppy of a story about an elephant, and every fresh story reminded one of us of another story absolutely dissimilar, and on we went until I knew Poppy had exhausted his little stock of stories, which, like his French idioms, he prepares beforehand. When he has got enough he comes down to see me.

The frequency of his visits depends on the number of stories he has been able to collect, and supposing there to be a sufficiently long interval between the visits, he brings me back my stories with the points left out. It makes quite new stories of them. But the Puffin story he got all right. He generally does when it is anything about a boy. It is extraordinary how he loves a boy. Why could n't Cynthia have been a little Popham of Popham, or a Popham Popham of Great Popham, and made the best of men quite happy? Personally, I could not have wished to change Cynthia for anything.

He did n't go till his stock of stories was quite finished, the pot of jam nearly emptied, and the village thoroughly discussed.

He looks upon every man, woman, and child as his own particular property. His theory is they are his, but must be self-supporting, for the good of their souls. Some of the men he is willing to help. He is nice to

men because they once were boys, and to boys perhaps because they might one day be men, — but women?

They don't want much!

What a P. S. is to a woman in a letter, my doormat is to Poppy. He never begins to talk of really vital things until he takes root on that. On this occasion it was while digging the end of his walking-stick into the said cocoanut mat, that he remembered the political meeting that the other side were going to hold. He was n't really afraid of it.

"They won't turn me out," he said plaintively, "and I don't know that I should care much if they did, except that a Popham has always held the seat. It does n't do to disappoint people."

I agreed that it did n't, and I said that he must buck up and remember that Alec Viner was rather a dangerously nice sort of rival.

"Oh, he 's all right; but he can't speak a bit."

Here Poppy shook his head lugubriously, just as though he were a speaker himself, which he is not.

"Not that he can help that," says Jane; "there 's no blame to a gentleman if he can't put into words ideas he does n't possess. He may be a good enough politician for all that, perhaps better. Speech is a dangerous thing for those who possess it."

XXIV

A FEW days before the meeting was to take place Cynthia came to see me. I was planting bulbs.

I like Cynthia. I like even the way she opens the door and peeps round to make sure that I want to see her.

Now the Cynthias of this world who have engaging ways, limpid eyes, soft voices, and tender hearts should know that people are always glad to see them.

The Cynthias of this world may not be so interesting nor so brilliant as the Margarets, judging by Great Popham, but I can imagine a man liking to have Cynthia sitting opposite him at breakfast. As a matter of fact, being Cynthia, she would sit beside him, — within reach, — which only shows how difficult it is to generalise.

I was going, also, to say how comfortable it would look to have her at the other corner of the fireplace, but there again, she would never sit at the other corner. But it does n't matter; she would be pleasant to look upon whether seen in profile at close quarters, or in full face at a distance.

That she had something to ask me, I could see.

Her interest in bulbs was feigned, although she listened patiently enough to my lecture thereon, and even asked a pertinent question here and there.

"There is something extraordinarily beautiful about a bulb one has planted one's self, Cynthia," I said.

"Indoors?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, indoors; planted outdoors one expects them to come up, but indoors there 's such an element of chance about it. A narcissus, pheasant-eyed, came up so unexpectedly last year."

"Why unexpectedly?" said Cynthia.

"Well, because, although the man in the shop said it was a pheasant-eyed narcissus, how could he tell? Moreover, Jane said I had planted it upside down. How could she tell? She said the same of the acorn I planted."

"It 's pointy end down, is n't it?" said Cynthia. "No, pointy end up."

"It 's not so easy as you think, Cynthia. However, it was the greatest success and so was the narcissus. The oak was not so tall as the narcissus, but then I don't think oaks are supposed to be at such an early age."

Cynthia fidgeted, and I heartlessly went on: —

"My narcissus was very tall during all the time of its growth I watched it. It got three inches and a quarter! Then a flower, such a flower!"

"White?" said Cynthia faintly.

"White, of course. It was wonderful enough as a bud, wrapped in brown tissue paper, and when I went to bed the night of its budhood, I began a poem about it. I went to sleep though, before I could find a rhyme to 'wrapped.' 'Oh, unknown bud in tissue paper wrapped.'"

"It 's awfully good," said Cynthia.

"Thank you," I said; "the rhythm is all right, is n't it?"

Cynthia sighed.

"Well, in the morning the bud had become a narcissus, pheasant-eyed. I studied its front view, its profile, and I wondered how many people realised that a narcissus had a profile. It had a scent all its own, as they say in novels."

"I've read that," said Cynthia.

"We all have. Encouraged by my great success —"

"Are you going to write a thing on bulbs?" broke in Cynthia.

"A thing?"

"Well, an article. I met Mr. Howard just now and he read me one in the lane."

"How like him! Was it on the relative proportion of forces in nature as for and against spontaneous combustion?"

"I think it was. It was about Dr. Johnson and his knowledge of natural history."

"Well, why should n't we all write articles? Happy thought! It seems to me that there are people who would like to know how to plant bulbs and acorns. I think the fashion that has arisen of women writing on subjects of which they know nothing is a very helpful one."

"Yes," said poor Cynthia.

"The expert," I continued, "in anything is so discouraging. He invariably warns the inexperienced to think well before he embarks on an undertaking

which demands exceptional ability, lifelong experience, and indomitable perseverance."

"That sort of thing," said Cynthia, "to a woman may sometimes act as a deterrent, whereas a few words from one who does not know the difficulties may be an encouragement."

"Heavens!" I exclaimed, "the child has grown up; the bud has flowered."

I dropped my trowel and was about to give Cynthia a hug, when she lifted a small finger against me, clad in dogskin.

"How much valuable work has been lost to the world owing to the advice of the weary expert!"

Here Cynthia sank into a chair and cast her limpid eyes heavenwards.

"That's the last English composition I shall ever do; I am to be finished next month!"

"It must be a wonderful thing," I said, "to feel finished! I cannot imagine what it will be like.

"Cynthia," I said, "forgive me for teasing you about bulbs. What do you want?"

"Nice, comfy, kind Christian, do put away that horrid trowel and leave off about the silly old bulbs. This is so much more important."

She settled herself down before the wood fire, and giving the log a gentle push with the toe of her boot, said, "What I like about you —"

This was interesting; what was it she liked about me?

"Is that you always seem so open-minded. You

never seem to take sides. I mean you are friends with every one."

"That sounds a little wobbly, Cynthia, morally wobbly."

"No, nice. I hate rocky people. Isn't yours an unbiassed mind?"

"That 's another word for it, perhaps."

"I mean you seem to see all sides — in politics, for instance."

"After all I've done for your father?"

"Yes, but I think one ought to hear all sides, both sides, I mean, don't you? It appears, for some extraordinary reason, that I can't! I don't see why I shouldn't, as I'm not really out!"

I began to see light.

"You would like to go to the Liberal meeting?"

"Well, yes, you see that 's just what I can't do. I thought perhaps you would go and tell us what happens?"

"Us." Cynthia was growing up fast. She would be quite finished by next month.

"Yes, I see, you think an unbiassed mind should be there to hear how Mr. Viner speaks."

"Yes, I think we should like to know."

"It is only right that we should know the strength of the enemy."

"Ye-es," said Cynthia.

"Very well, I will go."

She gave me a hug which I at once recognised as being purely political, and we talked of other things.

We came back very often to Mr. Viner. All roads seemed to lead Brocken way.

Brocken is a beautiful place. It boasts, among other things, four lodges; so in Jane's eyes it is a very grand place. In other people's, too. But Brocken's owner is tall and boyish, with a merry smile that counts much more in Cynthia's eyes than any amount of lodges. I should have said that Margaret would have gone better than Cynthia with four lodges. Her carriage entitles her to things of that sort. But I am sure Mr. Viner will be much happier with Cynthia. Margaret would undoubtedly start her married life by having the family jewels reset, whereas I can see Cynthia living her nights under the weight of the Viner tiaras, shaking hands with every one, from motives purely political. Into Margaret's handshakes would be bound to steal a more personal element.

So I promised Cynthia, and I went.

Young Viner had n't much chance of speaking, after all.

He began well enough, by saying: "Ladies and gentlemen, you have all no doubt heard of Julius Cæsar?"

Now this was quite a good beginning. It argued a certain amount of learning on the part of the youthful speaker, without its overpowering his less cultured hearers. I was feeling quite proud of him — for Cynthia's sake — when from the end of the barn came a voice.

"'Ere Oi be, sir!"

We had, for the moment, forgotten our own Julius Cæsar!

A roar of laughter greeted him, and poor Mr. Viner had not the ready wit to turn it to account. So it all worked out rather well for Poppy, for what subsequently took place could hardly be dignified by the name of meeting.

Julius Cæsar was quite overcome when he was visited by Poppy the next day, and he has never been able to understand what he did that was so wonderful.

"Oi never was one to speak much. Come to think on't, it was the first speech as ever Oi made. Oi could have said more 'n that." So he is wont to explain, as he rubs his head and wonders.

Poppy got in all right, and Cynthia does n't see why a girl should n't marry a man who differs from her father in politics. Poppy does n't either, and he really agrees with Cynthia when she says, "What does it matter which side a man is on if he votes for what is right?"

Meanwhile the new Mademoiselle was a source of unending interest to every one in the village. Her adventures were told and retold, and what she thought exactly of the Howards was known to all. That she had some difficulty in teaching the children French I knew. Even Jack disdained her methods, and Pat said, "Don't teach me that sort of French! Teach me the sort of French I shall want when I go to Paris."

There was wisdom in that! We all know how little use French verbs are when we get face to face with

the real thing in Paris. How subjunctives fly before the avalanche of words which descends upon us from the mouth of a Frenchman! Mouth? From his eyes, his arms, his hands, — his hands particularly, — his legs even. There is no part of him that does n't express a thousand things, and all in French — so beautiful, that it in no way resembles the language as learned in the days of our childhood out of a little mulberry-coloured book.

Jack said he could n't talk all day because it made his throat sore. Knowing Mademoiselle as I do, I cannot believe that she wanted him to talk all day. But Jack has not much idea of time. Or, perhaps, it is grown-ups who have no conception of time.

I asked Jack one day if he would come and stay with me. He shook his head.

"For a little while, Jack," I said.

He shook his head.

"For six weeks, Jack?"

"S-ix w-eeks pass longer than you th-ink," he said.

That is the only fault I have to find with the Howard children: there is always their mother to contend against. They won't leave her. Mademoiselle made a mistake when she first came in holding up as a threat, "I 'll tell your mother!"

Peggy widened her eyes at this and laughed. "We don't mind if you do tell mother, because she always understands. Only it makes her sad if we are naughty. She 's never cross."

Then Mademoiselle used that weapon.

"And it is true," she said to me, "she never cross!"

Her enthusiasm for Mrs. Howard's beauty burned furiously. She would often come to me and talk about it. She was fond of trying to estimate how many men had gone to their destruction because of her fatal beauty. "Ah, dese good women!" she would exclaim.

I suggested that Mrs. Howard might on the contrary have influenced men for good, but she shook her head. "For good, mademoiselle? That is left to us plain women et le bon Dieu."

She even went so far as to credit poor Mr. Dare with a wonderful goodness in tolerating Mrs. Dare after seeing Mrs. Howard.

"Dat poor man," she would say, "with his femme ecclésiastique!"

I told her I was sure Mr. Dare had no feelings for Mrs. Howard that he could not proclaim from the housetop.

"'Ousetop, yes!"

There were other things she told me, on the authority of Nannie, of a nature so romantic that I advised her not to tell them to — Mrs. Dare, for instance.

"Mon Dieu, non! Only to you, Miss 'Op, who understand these things. To no one else in the village."

That was as well. Of course, Poppy would have enjoyed them immensely.

XXV

A GREAT day was that on which Poppy brought Puffin, who was staying at Great Popham, to tea.

If there was any excitement shown, it was by Poppy and me. Jane, too. She and I were positively hysterical in the choice of cakes. Puffin was perfectly self-possessed.

"D' you think he 's like me?" said Poppy, with a smile too big for his face.

I said I certainly did see a likeness, but I could n't say where exactly: family likenesses were so elusive, and so forth.

"You like to be like your uncle, don't you, Puffin?" said Poppy.

Puffin smiled, but did not further commit himself.

Personally, if I had been Sir Popham, I should have had a little doubt on the subject.

"Puffin 's a tremendous man on a horse, are n't you?"

Puffin smiled.

"Tell this nice lady about your pony; you know, the day you jumped the ditch!"

"It was Sammy did," said Puffin, in a moment of forgetfulness.

"Yes, that 's right! Of course, that 's splendid!" Turning to me — "Sammy 's a pony;" then to Puffin, "Go on, tell this pretty lady all about it."

A pair of blue eyes from under black eyelashes glanced at me. The "pretty" wasn't worth bartering his speech for, so he let it pass.

"Tell her, Puffin."

"You do," he said.

"Oh, I can't tell it," said Poppy. "You're not shy!"

Puffin shook his head and maintained a severe silence.

"Well," said Poppy, resigning himself to the inevitable, "Puffin's got a pony, a black pony."

I knew the ruse; the pony was, of course, chestnut, bay, brown, white, or grey. Puffin wasn't going to fall into that trap. I respected him for it.

I have tried the same game myself with children, and I must say it has invariably been successful with anything under five, but Puffin was six and wise at that.

"We're going to have a conjurer at Great Popham, aren't we, Puffin, old man?" said Poppy.

"You like conjurers, don't you?" I ventured.

"No, I don't; I hate them," said Puffin.

"Why?" I said. I was rather interested.

"I don't like to be made to laugh when I don't want to."

This was really splendid. From that moment I knew I should get on with Puffin. He voiced the mind of so many of us, and I loved the way he said it. In fact, it appealed to me where the blueness of the eyes and the pinkness of the cheeks had not entirely won

me. I like a child to be responsive, and I felt sorry for Poppy. But Puffin refused to be shown off.

Poppy tried him with every bait. He told all Puffin's best stories wrong, and gave an absolutely untrue account of the whole of Puffin's life. But Puffin would n't rise; he went on eating buns. It would have been wiser if Poppy had left him alone.

He turned to me. "Puffin had six cups of iced coffee one day. What did you say then, Puffin?"

Puffin shook his head; he did n't remember.

"I say, Puffin, old man, what did you say that day when I asked you if you had got your legs stung, when you went into the nettles?"

Again he shook his head.

"That day out shooting, you know, round by Gorse Corner — you know — when the rabbit bolted."

"Which rabbit?" said Puffin. This was more than he could stand. It was a reflection on his home to suppose there was only one rabbit there.

"The one that ran between your legs."

"Heaps have," said Puffin.

"Yes, yes, but you remember the nettles, you know! I said, had you stung your legs, and you said — what?"

"I did n't say nothing, I spect," said Puffin. "I don't mind nettles."

"Yes, you did say something. You said, 'No, thank God, I 've got — my — gaiters — on'?"

"Mother says I must n't say, thank God, and people are n't supposed to say the same things twice."

What a precept to live up to!

"But it was rather smart for five, was n't it?" Poppy said, turning to me.

I agreed that it was, but I thought the conversation rather bad for Puffin; so I said, "Would you like to see a raven, Puffin?"

"Ra-ther!"

"It talks," I said.

"Rot," said he.

"But it does," I said.

"Swear!"

"Swear!"

"On your solemn oath?"

"On my solemn oath."

Puffin nodded.

"At least, it *can* talk," I added.

"There, I knew," said Puffin, with all the air of a disillusioned man of the world. "I knew you 'd say something like that. Grown-ups always get out of things."

"It always does talk," I said. "Only one can't be too sure of things in this world."

"It always does," said Puffin; "that 's more like. Has it spoken every single time you wanted it to?"

"Yes, I think so."

Puffin drew a long whistle inwards and made ready to go out with me.

"I shan't be long," I said to Poppy.

By the time we reached the back door, Puffin and I were friends. A stuffed trout in the passage had helped enormously. In fact, it was not until after a

thorough examination of the trout — down to its smallest spot — that he slipped his hand in mine.

Most people have experienced the thrill of a child's hand stealing into theirs. It is such a lovely act of self-surrender, so entirely trusting. It must be the same feeling of perfect trust that makes a dog give its paw. The act must not be in any way connected with biscuit; that, of course, spoils it. It is a sign of confidence we all love, unless the paw happens to be muddy and our clothes new.

That reservation applies only to those who are obliged to think of such things, by force of circumstances. No rich person, with a soul, would hesitate to sacrifice a dress, however expensive, to save hurting the feelings of a dog. Let us hope that dogs know that some of us are poorer than others.

When Puffin saw the stuffed trout, he said, "Here 's something like!"

Mercifully the raven talked. I left Puffin and the gardener together, and I went back to the disconsolate Poppy.

"Funny things children are," he said. "I shan't be a hundred yards on the way home before I shall be doubled up with laughing at something that boy says. It 's always like that; they never play up when you want 'em to."

"He 's a jolly little chap," I said.

"Is n't he?" said Poppy. "I 'm glad to think the place will be his some day. It 's awfully nice to see him with the men on the estate. They 're awfully fond of

him. I said to him the other day, 'All this will be yours some day, Puffin,' and he said, 'What fun we 'll have, Uncle Poppy, — no beastly lessons!' It was decent of the little beggar, was n't it? I 'm sorry he 's not a grandson, all the same, though I 'm a bit young for one that age."

"You will have grandchildren some day," I said.

"Yes, but it 's no good, you see; the name, you see! I wish my Margaret's son could succeed. But, of course, it can't be! It 's awfully good of you, Christian, to talk to me like this. Women are so confoundedly prudish, — English women, I mean, as a rule, — especially in a village. It 's a relief to let one's self go."

"But," I ventured, "we have n't said anything really that Mrs. Dare could n't say."

"Humph!" said Poppy. "Catch Mrs. Dare mentioning Margaret's children."

Puffin appeared at that moment.

"Are you cold, old man?" said his anxious uncle.

"On the topsy-turvy I 'm very hot," said Puffin.

I watched them walk away. A hundred yards down the road, I saw Poppy bend double. Was Puffin saying something funny?

No, his shoe-lace was undone, that was all. He had hold of Poppy's back hair while he balanced himself on one leg.

So it was Poppy, no doubt, who was saying something funny or feeling funny, certainly.

XXVI

"'WOMAN is an absurd and ridiculous animal, but pleasing withal,' so says —"

"Mr. Howard?" asked Mrs. Durnford, who had looked in as she passed.

"No, Erasmus," I answered.

"Oh," said Mrs. Durnford, "he was upset, I suppose. Women do try a lot of hair-washes, but it 's no use minding. After all, if he knew his was the best, he should have been content with that. Doctors must n't mind people not having sense enough to know good from bad."

"But this was another Erasmus — not Wilson," I ventured.

"Trading on the name, I suppose. It 's often done. I always say you 've got hair or you have n't, just as one person has a pretty nose and the other has an ugly one."

"Yes," I said, "but then they have a nose; it 's not a question of pretty hair or ugly hair, it 's hair or no hair!"

"Well, if it 's a case of no hair, I don't suppose it matters what hair-wash they use."

This is to show how Mrs. Durnford goes off at a tangent.

Fresh from a dip into Erasmus, I hazarded a quotation; it also prevented my being obliged to express

an opinion as to the sanity of Mrs. Dare. Off went Mrs. Durnford straight away to a bald statement of fact. It was no good if you had n't got hair using any hair-wash, or harm either.

Talking of hair, Mr. Howard argues that it is only a good woman who will do her hair as Mrs. Durnford does.

Whether it testifies to goodness or not, I am not prepared to say. It shows a certain simplicity of purpose; but if she knew that some one had once said that she must — by reason of her hair — be a poetess, she would quickly have resorted even to false quantities to refute the suggestion, since to be literary, in her eyes, savours of a dangerous and deliberate untruthfulness.

"Quite grand people dress badly in the morning," she said, by way of changing the subject. Whether she was apologising for her own coat and skirt or excusing mine, I did not know.

"By the way, I suppose I ought to call on Lady Victoria again; it 's my turn," she said.

"Is it?" I asked.

"What ought I to wear?"

"What you generally wear, I should think."

"Not this?"

"Well, another coat and skirt, perhaps, that —"

"Not a dress?"

"No, why should you?"

"I did n't know who one might meet there."

"If you go early in the afternoon, you are certain to find every one in coats and skirts."

"Well, I thought about tea time."

I did n't say anything; she was evidently determined to find Lady Victoria in.

She did, and she popped in on her way back to tell me all about it.

"Coats and skirts? It was cruel of you. There was one woman in a ball dress,— almost. It was most indecent. She was *so* powdered —"

"That she looked like a scone; were you going to say that?"

"Well, no, but she did."

"You could n't have walked through the wood in a ball dress, could you?" I ventured.

"No, but I 've got a dress with a train and a jet yoke."

"I 'm so sorry."

"You need n't be sorry in the sense that I mind looking sane and sensible, but I do mind that kind of person laughing at me. The one like a scone wore ropes of pearls. She looked like a ballet dancer."

"A ballet dancer?"

"Well, her face did. Her dress was long, so of course I don't know what her legs were like, and I don't mind much. I don't care for legs."

"Like the 'bus conductor!"

Mrs. Durnford paid no attention to this.

"Lady Victoria," she continued, "was in white, with corals, at her age! I 've read about society and all that, but I never imagined things could be like that at five o'clock in the afternoon."

"Like what?"

"Like what I say."

"Well, if people come in wet."

"It 's as dry as cracknels!" she said indignantly.

"Well, if they come in dry, but tired, and want to change, I don't see why they should n't change into something light instead of into a crimson cashmere trimmed with black braid."

"A crimson cashmere trimmed with black braid sounds suitable, to my mind. But there. I 'm a country doctor's wife, and mean to remain so. I read the other day that we were drifting into the state the Roman Empire was in before, you know — what Gibbon wrote about?"

"She declined and fell?" I suggested.

"That 's it. Of course people who write exaggerate, but still there 's something in it, no doubt. Mrs. Howard was there."

"She was suitably dressed?" I asked.

"Dressed, my dear Miss Hope, who knows how Mrs. Howard 's dressed with a face like that?"

I smiled. Mrs. Durnford could grasp essentials, after all.

"The other women looked like, I don't know what, beside her."

"Did she know any one staying there?"

"Every one, I think; anyhow, she told me who every one was, and she said the woman in the ball dress was very kind and did heaps of good works. I said, I thought it was a pity she did n't set a better example

in dress; so bad for girls in a village to spend all their money in flummeries."

I hastened to suggest that perhaps the wearer of the ball dress lived in London.

"Yes, so Mrs. Howard said. She said that among the people of her set that kind of dressing would be quite unnoticed. 'Whereas for you and me, Mrs. Durnford, it would seem ridiculous.'" That must have been balm to Mrs. Durnford. She went on, "But then that's Mrs. Howard all over: she always finds some good in every one, and the ball dress one seemed very fond of her, and said, 'I have n't had a word with you.' That was when we went away."

"And why had n't she?" I asked.

"Because I suppose Mrs. Howard preferred talking to me," said Mrs. Durnford a little snappily. "Lady Victoria said Mrs. Howard had monopolised me. Of course it may have looked a little rude, but when friends get together, you know what happens. It makes other people feel a little out of it. Talking of rudeness, there was a very rude young man there who told me a story, and when I said I did n't see the point, he said, how dear of me, no one did. I call it the greatest impertinence, and to be called 'dear' by a young man! He put the tips of his fingers together, screwed up his eyes, you know the kind of blinking, idiotic stupidity, and said, 'How too dear of you!' 'Too dear,' that was it. I don't think I'll tell Dr. Durnford."

Mrs. Durnford labours under the delusion that there

is virtue in saying exactly what she thinks. I am inclined to think that virtue lies in exactly the opposite course. However, she has a perfect right to her own opinion, as she often says I have to mine. But why does she always unburden her soul to me after doing what to her is a matter of "principle"? This is her method.

"I have come to consult you, Miss Hope," she said one day. "You know we dined with the Fields the other night, and the doctor was very unwell the next day?"

I nodded.

"Now I think it is only right, under the circumstances, to let Mrs. Field know the facts of the case."

I put my head on one side, which stands for a mark of interrogation. Mrs. Durnford understands it.

"Yes, it is; at least I think so. You have a perfect right to your opinion, of course. This is the letter I have written to Mrs. Field. Tell me if it is all right."

I promised to give my opinion.

Out of her pocket she drew a folded letter. She cleared her throat and began:—

"DEAR MRS. FIELD—"

That certainly sounded quite affectionate, if only one could emphasise in writing as one can in reading.

"I cannot tell you how much we enjoyed ourselves last night; I said to Doctor Durnford as we were driving home, how very delightful it had been, and he agreed with me. I tell you this so that you will perfectly understand that we anticipated no trouble. We

were in the best of spirits. My husband felt particularly well, and seemed almost surprised at feeling so well after dining with friends; in fact, he said so several times. But this morning he was seized, or attacked rather, by sickness, and he was, I may say it as a doctor's wife to another woman, very unwell. He is unable to go out to-day, and I am compelled to suspect that something he ate last night is the cause of his sudden indisposition. I wonder if it could have been those tournados? They were very good, but one never quite knows in the excitement what one is eating. I have been through the menu with my cook, who is a most careful woman — her father was in the fire brigade for many years and was severely burned on two occasions — and she thinks it was perhaps the peach ice. Tinned things are a little dangerous; you can get peaches in bottles now. I should be glad to hear if any of your other guests suffered in the same way, as it is a comfort to trace a thing of this kind to its sauce. You will forgive me writing like this; I always think it is best to go straight to the root of the matter, and to be perfectly natural with friends. I should be only too glad if any one told me their husband was ill after dining with me.

"Yours sincerely,

"ELIZABETH DURNFORD."

Mrs. Durnford looked at me anxiously.

"Well," I said, "as a letter I think it is admirable. May I just look at it?"

She handed it to me.

She had written "sauce!" as I thought.

"You've made a pun," I said.

"Have I? I do sometimes without knowing it."

"I think perhaps I should make one or two little alterations, just the slightest."

"But I've sent it! Should I write and apologise about the pun?"

"Oh, no; you've sent the letter, this is a copy? Well, then, it's quite excellent. I hope Mrs. Field will see it."

"See it? Of course she will. She got it by first post. Here's her answer. Will you read it to me? It sounds a little stuffy. I can't see why; can you?"

"It so entirely depends on the way one reads a letter; give it to me."

"'DEAR MRS. DURNFORD,—You can imagine how very sorry we are to hear of your husband's sudden indisposition, and how greatly distressed, if we are in any way responsible.'"

I drew breath.

"Yes," said Mrs. Durnford, "she is very sorry, there's no doubt. Go on."

"'Even now I hope we may be proved guiltless. The tournados, I feel certain, must be exonerated from all blame. They were of such a very simple nature, and under another name you would, no doubt, have recognised them as familiar friends above suspicion.

"'Of tinned things I have no experience, as I

agree with you in thinking them dangerous. Bottled fruit is, no doubt, excellent, but in this instance the peaches were fresh.

"'It is exceedingly gratifying to us to know that you enjoyed yourselves, and that at all events, for some hours after dinner, your husband felt so particularly well.

"'Hoping he will soon be quite himself again,

"'Yours sincerely,

"'M. FIELD.'"

"Ye-es," said Mrs. Durnford, a little doubtfully, "I don't think she minds. Of course, it was unfortunate about the peaches. I never thought they would be likely to have fresh ones, although they are well connected. They keep men-servants. D'you think I ought to write and say Dr. Durnford is all right again? He has such wonderful recuperative powers."

"No, I don't think I would."

"You don't mind me consulting you, do you?"

"Not in the least, only when you have done the thing, you see, it 's not consulting, exactly!"

"Oh, it is to me. I like to know I have done the right thing. I suppose Lady Victoria, for instance, writes very good letters?"

"Not to me, I think."

"I mean good style?"

"Yes, I know; not to me. You see, she is generally in a great hurry and writes just what comes into her head."

There were several letters from Lady Victoria lying under a paper-weight on my writing table. I took up the first one, to see if it was a model of style for Mrs. Durnford. It began, "You idiot."

So I put it face downwards, and took up the next. It had no beginning; that would be worse than useless to Mrs. Durnford. A third began, "That wretch Poppy." I put that down.

"No, she does n't write a good letter. For a person who despises literature, how do you account for your style?"

"Well," said Mrs. Durnford, "I used to write essays at school. They were always marked 'excellent,' and I suppose that helps."

She went away, thinking me, I know, very mean and secretive. She was longing to see on what terms I really was with Lady Victoria.

XXVII

"Dr. Durnford's daughter is coming home soon, miss," announced Jane one day.

"It is difficult to realise he has one," I said.

"It is, miss, and Mrs. more, seeing what she looks like. You can't be expected to realise it when all you know is a big girl suddenly appearing twice a year in church, bigger each time than the last."

"That 's only to be expected," I said.

"Yes, miss, but some show it more than others. Seeing her from behind, I suppose makes a difference. She shows it breadth-ways. I hope she won't be a trouble to her parents."

"Why should she be, Jane?" I said.

"Well, she 's at school in France, miss, for one thing, and you never know what they learn there. Then she has the sort of eyes which mean trouble for some one — you know the kind?"

I did n't; so Jane proceeded to explain that eyes that flashed one moment and looked fit to murder the next, and were swimming most of the rest of the time, were the worst, — smouldering sort of eyes.

I agreed that they sounded too much for Little Popham altogether. Jane said it was n't their bigness so much as their expression.

"The Barneses had a girl," she continued, by way of illustration, "who went on anyhow about sunsets. She

lived with an artistic sort of a family, and they taught her to look at them upside down; goodness knows why! If God had meant us to look at things like that He would have made us that way up. Anyhow it was nearly the death of Mrs. Barnes when she came across Nellie, home for her holiday, bending down in the road and looking at the sunset — all sideways — her head on the ground almost, as if she was a born idiot. Enough to frighten any decent mother. Well, that girl came to a bad end, wrote poetry or some such thing."

Murderous, swimming, flashing eyes sounded rather too exciting for the quiet life Jane and I led, and as to Mrs. Durnford coping with them, it seemed quite impossible.

So as I had nothing very particular to do, I thought I would call in and find out from Mrs. Durnford what she proposed doing with the possessor of the smouldering eyes.

Some evening, I said to myself, I will go and borrow this volcanic girl, and together we will steal away over the common to the place I love best, and there I will show her the kind of sunset I like. We will stand as we feel inclined, and I shall enjoy fanning into flame those smouldering eyes. Since the Howards had come I had not felt the need of a companion who loved a sunset as I did before they came. But there are sunsets enough to go round, and every one sees some new light in them.

How strange it was that a freckled litt[illegible]or

like Mrs. Durnford should possess anything so surprising in the shape of a daughter!

Mrs. Durnford and I generally sought some excuse for calling upon one another, except between the hours of three and four o'clock in the afternoon. My interest in the daughter hardly furnished me with a sufficiently strong one for a morning call, so I picked up the first book to hand and with that, for an excuse, tucked under my arm, I started.

As I walked I wondered why Mrs. Durnford should have sent her daughter to Paris, and why for so long, and why Little Popham knew so little of her.

I remembered her as a child, not pretty. I remembered vaguely thinking that in the days of the three-volume novel she might have become a beauty towards the end of the second volume. But beyond that I had not taken much notice of her. When Jane told me she was coming home, I was naturally interested.

I know it would be correct if I did not allow Jane to discuss my neighbours; I might, at least, pretend that such was my rule. But if any woman has an old servant, an old and faithful servant, and can deny her the innocent satisfaction of knowing more about people than the people themselves know, I should be glad to learn how she has the heart to do it.

The old and faithful servant must have taught her to walk. She must have had a very large share in teaching her to talk. She must have taken her straight from the arms of a dying mother into hers. She must have dried her tears and comforted her. Then supposing

the old servant to have done all that, and more, is there any one who could say, "You must n't talk about people, Jane? No lady can listen to a servant's gossip."

Could any one do it? I could n't.

I found Mrs. Durnford cutting a small oval in a sheet of note-paper. She seemed so pleased to see me that I put down the book, without mentioning it as an excuse, and I also carried it home again.

When I discovered my mistake, I realised that the excuse would do for another day. In a country village one is careful of such things.

"You don't happen to have a twopenny-halfpenny stamp on you, do you, Miss Hope?"

"I 'm afraid not."

"I did n't suppose you would. My daughter is coming home."

"It seems so difficult to imagine you with a daughter."

"I suppose it is, Miss Hope. I can't say I 'm quite accustomed to it myself."

She walked to the mantelpiece, looked at herself in the mirror, and turning to me said, "I don't look in the least French, do I?"

"Well, no, you don't," I said, "at least like no French type I have seen. Of course, I think one is inclined to look upon French people as necessarily dark, very handsome, but distinctly un-English, whereas there must be fair Frenchwomen and are, of course. But you are not French looking in the least."

She sighed. "No, I don't suppose I could be if I wanted to. Have you time to sit down?"

I had several minutes to spare, and I thought of the busiest woman I ever knew and her answer when I asked her if she ever knew what it was to be idle. It was — on the face of it — a stupid question, but as it elicited this answer I am thankful I asked it.

"Idle?" she said. "Yesterday I was obliged to sit down for a moment, and I found myself saying, 'Here is an opportunity to blow my nose; it may not occur again.'"

I cannot pretend that any one in this village is as busy as that. If they were they could not express so delightfully their extreme business.

Meanwhile Mrs. Durnford had been standing before me, looking very harassed.

"It is this girl of mine. You could n't see two plainer people than Dr. Durnford and me, could you?"

She made a disclaiming gesture with her hand. "Don't try to get out of it. I 'm in earnest. So much of your life, Miss Hope, is spent in trying not to hurt people's feelings when most of them have n't the feelings to hurt. You need n't mind mine. Well, we are two every-day, clean, ordinary people."

"Well, yes, I suppose you are."

"Miss Hope, I really am troubled; directly that child was born, I knew there was something wrong. I felt shy with her from the first. She looked round about her almost at once, and I knew in a moment she was n't satisfied. I could tell she expected more than

we could give her. Our world would n't satisfy her, I knew. She did n't take to anything as she ought to have done. She had grand ways as soon as she could walk and long before she could talk properly.

"Young parents will try, of course, to find likenesses in children. Dr. Durnford nearly drove me crazy over it. There was no likeness to find. We were fair and the child was dark. We were ordinary people, frightfully ordinary, as I said before. The child from the first was not."

"It is strange," I said, "how children cast back to a former generation."

"No, Miss Hope; I tried that argument with Dr. Durnford, but it did not do, and I had n't the courage to say much. It was my fault. Before she was born I was determined that my child should n't lead the humdrum life I had led. I was determined she should be romantic and all that. I steeped myself in romance. I collected photographs of famous beauties, — regardless of their moral characters, — of tragedians, poets, and so forth. That 's why I hate literature now! It robbed us of our child."

I drew a deep breath; this really was surprising.

"Well," went on Mrs. Durnford, "that was the first stage. I would have given my life if that child could have been born fair and freckled. Freckles, I suppose, one could n't expect. But it was too late; she was dark. I called her Lily; I did my best. The next stage was that I discovered that I, plain Elizabeth Durnford, had brought into the world a child above

the ordinary, and I determined that she should be given every chance. Since you can't change a leopard's spots you might as well make the best of them. So I bought her coral beads and dressed her to match. Then every one said she looked like a gipsy."

Mrs. Durnford sighed. I tried to say something, but she stopped me with a gesture.

"Now she is coming home, and how am I to explain her to Little Popham?"

"Why should you explain her at all? Lots of children are quite unlike their parents. Have you a photograph of her?"

Mrs. Durnford had. She was sitting on it, as a matter of fact.

She showed it to me, holding over the face the piece of paper in which she had cut the oval.

I looked at the face. It was a very young face, very earnest, terribly earnest. Its strength made one feel quite sad, it was after all so unnecessarily emphasised. Under the serious brow the eyes undoubtedly smouldered. Jane was right. It was too much altogether for Little Popham. The mouth would n't do. It would shock Little Popham, although hardly any one in Little Popham would know why. It was a mouth with danger in its curves. But it was certainly an interesting face. I asked if I might see it without the paper, and Mrs. Durnford removed it.

"That 's better," I said, with a sigh of relief. "The emotions were too concentrated; besides, she has such a beautiful throat."

"Yes, but her father would never allow her to wear a dress like that. She had no business to be photographed in it. Photographers are usually married men, which is a comfort."

She pointed to the name of the photographer "et fils" in the corner, and gave a sigh of relief.

Why it did not occur to her that the "fils" portion of the partnership might have taken the photograph, I don't know.

I disregarded the photographer altogether; a Frenchman could stand much more than any one in Little Popham could.

"The dress isn't really low," I said, by way of comforting her.

"It depends on what you call low, Miss Hope."

I felt reproved.

"Well, I call anything too low, low. But really —"

"My daughter may look like many things, but she shall not look like a French actress if I can help it."

"Let me look again," I said. I looked. Mrs. Durnford came behind my chair and leaned over the back.

We both studied the photograph. Then the mother put out a finger and followed with it the line of the jaw.

"She 's lik her father from there to there," she said.

"I dare say, only his beard —"

"Yes, of course, but I know him back to the light. The line is the same."

"I think," I said, "you will be very proud of her."

"I am afraid not, Miss Hope; she will be an everlasting reproach to me, reminding me of my folly. You would n't have imagined me romantic, would you? My better self tries to make me believe that I despise sentimentality, my worse self only knows how I longed to elope with Dr. Durnford! The tameness of the whole thing drove me to desperation. Romance in a plain woman is funny — nothing more. Ridicule I could never stand! Plain women, my sort at all events, don't get romance, so the only thing they can do is to pretend they don't like it. That 's my method. It answers; in fact, it has become second nature."

"I see no harm," I said, "in either romance or sentiment."

Mrs. Durnford took no notice of this.

"I have never seemed at ease with the child. I was always at a disadvantage. If I knitted her woollen boots, I always made them sizes too large. I never seemed able to do either her or myself justice. Even now I don't in the least know what to do! She writes that she wishes to be called Dolores, and she calls me Madre.

"It makes me hot all over! Imagine Lady Victoria's face if she heard me called that. It doesn't sound respectable."

"I think," I said, "that it all points to two things, her extreme youth and the possession of a pair of very wonderful and expressive eyes. Of course, people expect things of eyes like that. The question is, Where did she get them from?"

Mrs. Durnford got very red, and I wondered what I had said to make her so uncomfortable.

"Mine is a bitter punishment, Miss Hope."

"It can be no punishment."

"It is, it is," said Mrs. Durnford firmly. "You don't know the worst. I slept for months before she came with Lord Byron's picture under my pillow."

It was a tremendous announcement, and Mrs. Durnford shook under the force of it.

If only I could have laughed, but no one could have laughed in the face of such misery.

"But she 's not like Lord Byron," I said feebly.

"You don't think so? I'm so glad; every moment I was afraid you would say she was. It is extraordinary what cowards conscience makes of us."

It was significant that Mrs. Durnford left me to find my own way out. Over and over again, I had told her that I perfectly understood the latch of the door. Now I could prove it. As I fumbled with it I had time to think that on that very bit of linoleum on which I was standing, Dolores would, in a few days, stand.

What would her smouldering eyes see in the mahogany hatstand, or the three feet of painted drainpipe, in which stood the umbrellas of her very ordinary parents? What, in the house, could be worthy of those eyes? Was there anything of sufficient beauty to satisfy their depths? I walked out of the house rather depressed. Was it fair that in the matter of parents, babies should have no choice?

Deep in thought I walked farther than I meant. I

found myself out on the common. I had forgotten to order the starch for Maud, but I had found the very thing to satisfy the soul of Dolores.

"Is Mrs. Durnford excited about Miss Lily coming home, miss?" said Jane.

"Very," I said. Then I thought I might pave the way for Mrs. Durnford, so I added, "Miss Dolores is coming home."

"Miss what, miss?" said Jane.

"Dolores," I repeated.

Jane sniffed. "Is it French for Lily, miss? I always knew it was no language for Christian folk to trifle with. Think how plain and straightforward the Bible says, 'Consider the lilies, how they grow.' Fancy teaching children to say 'Consider the dolores, how they grow.'"

"It is n't the French for lilies, Jane."

"German, then, I suppose, miss."

XXVIII

Lily, or I should say, Dolores Durnford, arrived.

That was one excitement; another was that the Dares were to give a party — Jane said — in honour of Miss Lily.

That she was to burst upon our astonished vision, how astonished we little guessed, was clear, since not so much as the tip of her nose was seen in the village before the party.

Mrs. Barley thought she was a little unnatural in feeling, not having written to her French friends to say she had arrived. Whether Mrs. Barley had laid in a stock of twopenny-halfpenny stamps and had not got rid of them, or if she went by the addresses on the letters, I don't know. Anyhow, she said she liked young women to show feeling even if they had n't got it.

The Dare's party was to be a particularly grand one, since Margaret and Cynthia Popham were coming.

They very seldom came to anything given by any one in the village. Margaret was invariably engaged, and Cynthia too busy with her lessons. Lady Victoria was wont to write that she could not let Cynthia come, — the distraction would be too great, — which gave the giver of the party a certain feeling of satisfaction. To give a party too distracting to any one's peace of mind argues that, as a party, it can boast of at least the elements of success.

They come to my parties, but then mine are in no way exciting, to any one but Jane.

However, to the Dare's party the Pophams were coming, and Mrs. Dare said it was absolutely necessary, in consequence, to have ices. Mr. Dare did n't see why. Mrs. Dare pointed out to him very clearly that they had been brought up to that sort of thing.

So that settled the matter, and the ices came out from Selford in a cart in the afternoon.

The Howard children met the cart and asked what was in it. So I know.

The party was from seven to eleven. It was clearly stated. I wish grown-up invitations were as explicit. As a child it was such a comfort to know the exact hour at which one was supposed to leave, and one had to go, too.

There are many improvements I could make in life generally, and curiously enough, in many cases it would mean reverting to the days of our childhood. I should like grown-ups to keep the simplicity of children.

It would be painful at times, and certainly embarrassing, always, unless every one became children again, which I know many people would refuse to do. But the advantages would outweigh the disadvantages.

If a number of us lived in a palace of truth we should get accustomed to the glare. That reminds me of Pat's version of "People in glass houses —"

It was in Miss Mole's day. On Saturdays it was her custom to give the children what she called a "general paper."

It was amazing the variety of Moly Poly's knowledge — it ranged from "why snails have shells" to "what France would have been if there had been no revolution." She was very fond of what she called "unfinished proverbs." The beginning was given and the end was left to the children.

"People who live in glass houses —" So much of it Miss Mole gave. The better half, I think, was Pat's. I may be wrong; here it is — "should undress in the dark."

If living in a palace of truth were impossible, here is another suggestion. I would have people born with tails that wagged whether they would or no. I mean that they should be the uncontrolled means of expression. If people were pleased the tail would wag; if they were not, no power of politeness could make it. Neither should they have the power to refuse to wag it when they were pleased, but too cussed to allow it. Then when I was showing some one round the garden I should know they were really pleased if I heard the swish of a tail against a silk foundation. How encouraging it would be! Supposing there to be no silken sound, I could take the shortest way back to the house — avoiding the frames — and ring for tea.

There are few tails that would n't respond to that call.

Such a mechanical device would also spare one that terrible facial stiffness that comes from the social smile. Every well-meaning person must know the complaint.

I am, it appears, thinking mostly of women, since I

speak of silk foundations. Somehow or other I never feel the same apprehension of boring men. They are perhaps more easily amused. Perhaps they remain children longer than women.

Of course, some one will say that women don't wear silk foundations in the country. Many don't, and of them I am not in the least afraid when taking them round the garden. Their expression of pleasure is quite involuntary; it sometimes bursts from them at the sight of a tiny brown shoot just appearing above the ground.

The women who frighten me, who come from Great Popham, mostly, would not see that shoot, and if they did they would not know the hope it holds out to those who know.

I wonder if there has ever been an atheist gardener? It would be interesting to know. There may, of course, be gardeners who *think* they are. That 's quite a different thing.

I was early at the party. A promise to be so had been extracted by Mrs. Dare outside the post office in the morning.

So at seven o'clock I deposited my cloak on the oak chest in the hall, as was my wont.

There I made a mistake! There was a cloak room. This also was in honour of the Popham girls.

A small maid-servant who carried, with apparent ease, an enormous cap on her head, bore my cloak away. She whispered reproachfully as she went, "There 's a brush and comb and hairpins and a hand-glass in the other room."

I was announced. The room was cleared. In the middle of it stood Mrs. Dare. Her dress fastened up behind. It was silk, claret-coloured, trimmed with velvet.

"Dear Miss Hope!" she said, "how charming you look! You know it is only a half and half?"

"Yes, I know," I said, becoming acutely conscious of the triangle of bare neck at the base of my throat.

"You won't catch cold?"

"Oh, no," I said, laughing.

"I have plenty of shawls if you should require one."

I thought with a shudder of the Guild shawls, in their grey and red dozens, reposing on the spare-room bed.

"Soft white ones," she added, "personal presents to me. We thought it would be nice to give a little party to introduce Lily Durnford to her parents' friends. The child has been away so much. She is very likely to be shy. It is so good of Margaret and Cynthia to come in and it? They are accustomed to things so differently done. But there are ices. I do not suppose Lady Victoria will come. She said she would if she could, but she is always so busy. Such a wonderful woman, is n't she? I think for a woman of the world she is a singularly good woman, don't you?"

I said I thought she was an excellently good woman. I did not say that I did not see why being a woman of the world should make this impossible.

Mrs. Dare clings with surprising tenacity to the combination of the world and the devil. The flesh

she can separate, because she is inclined to think thin people are more wicked than fat.

"Of course," she continued, "earls' daughters are very sheltered, are they not?"

I said I thought they perhaps had their temptations; at which she looked very pained. The temptations of the world, in Mrs. Dare's eyes, are drink and another sin, equally impossible in either case to associate with Lady Victoria.

Mrs. Dare, of course, did not know how Lady Victoria longed to be thought wicked, with reservations. She has often told me how she would love to run away, if only as far as the station, just to see what it was like. Then there would be the enormous advantage, supposing she went farther than to the station, of reverting, for a time, at all events, to her maiden name. So much prettier than Popham.

"Are we going to dance?" I asked Mrs. Dare.

"Well, dear, I suppose we must. Margaret and Cynthia are accustomed to it. Of course, the music is the difficulty."

"An insuperable difficulty?" I stroked the plastron of velvet, nearest to hand, and said, "If that is a difficulty," velvet stroked down, "it is easily overcome," velvet stroked up. Whereupon Mrs. Dare said, "How kind of you, dear! You don't mind?"

"I love it," I said.

"Margaret, no doubt, would like supper at eight o'clock; otherwise she would miss her dinner. What do you think?"

"I should n't consider Margaret for a moment. I should have supper at whatever hour you like."

"Yes, I dare say Margaret will have had something with her tea; an egg, perhaps."

"Like God," I ventured.

"Dear Christian!" said Mrs. Dare.

"It 's only a story about a child," I murmured.

"Mademoiselle," went on Mrs. Dare, "says Margaret always goes to tea in the schoolroom, if she can. Mademoiselle has had to object. There are too many young men, they excite Cynthia."

There was a ring at the bell — and another.

The colour in Mrs. Dare's cheeks deepened. It really was exciting. I took up my stand against the Japanese cabinet, facing the door; it was an advantageous position.

The Howard family, I guessed, would arrive early, the Pophams late. I was wrong; the door was thrown open, and in walked Margaret and Cynthia.

Margaret was enjoying herself already, that I could see. I wondered what had happened outside.

She greeted Mrs. Dare charmingly, expressing without words how delightful the party already was, how perfectly arranged were the brush, comb, and hairpins in the other room.

She came over to me and squeezed my hand. "Is n't it lovely, Christian?"

"What is lovely? You?" I asked.

"You dear silly, don't pretend you don't adore this sort of thing."

Much as I love Margaret, I objected to her calling Mrs. Dare's party "this sort of thing" when she was doing her best. But Margaret was enjoying herself; she was moreover her mother's daughter, so it was no use doing anything but squeeze back.

"I nearly asked Vespers for half a side of streaky," she said. Vespers was the grocer from Selford who was announcing the guests.

"You never did such a thing in your life, and you betray lamentable ignorance. But how delicious you look!"

"It looks pure, does n't it?" she said, looking down at her muslin frock. "It is such fun to be a Cynthia again, to feel so good and unspotted from the world. I thought a low frock would be the death of Mrs. Dare. Oh, naughty Christian," she said, covering with her hand the offending triangle cut out of my dress at the neck. "Does n't Cynthia look sweet? Is Mr. Gray coming?"

"I am afraid so."

"Why afraid? I think it is such fun. Are n't you glad you are good-looking, Christian?"

I laughed.

"Does n't it give you a comfy feeling at the end of the day? It does me. I like to know I shall look nice when I wake up in the morning. Some people look hor—"

The door was again flung open by Vespers from Selford, and Mr. and Mrs. Howard were announced.

Truly, Little Popham was rich in beauty. It was

really astonishing. The children made a rush at me. "Bags I Christian, no, me, me."

A happy Christian was I.

The room was fast filling. I was loath to leave my place of vantage until I had seen Dolores, and yet the children were clamouring to dance. Once more the door opened.

"Mrs. Durnford and — Miss — Durnford!"

No wonder he laid stress on the Miss Durnford.

In walked Mrs. Durnford looking so unhappy. Behind her came Dolores. Ye gods, could Little Popham bear it? was my first thought; my second, what fun for Margaret!

Mrs. Dare rose to the occasion; if she gasped she was at perfect liberty to do so in her own house; she also blushed, and the blush stole down to her collar and remained there — it may have gone further — throughout the evening.

"Lily Dolores," said Mrs. Durnford, "this is Miss Hope."

Lily Dolores turned her eyes upon me, those swimming, smouldering eyes, — as Jane had described them, — and smiled at me. A slow, smouldering smile, too. I smiled back, a staccato smile, but a smile for all that.

Not even the photographer had prepared me for this.

If her father would have forbidden her to be photographed in that dress, he would certainly have prevented her coming to Mrs. Dare's party in this one. And yet, why?

It was perfectly plain. That was where it erred so

terribly. It was too plain. Little Popham is not accustomed to see form more or less as God made it. Before it can be submitted to the gaze of Little Popham it must be disguised, disfigured even. Frills, flounces, sashes, all have their purposes. But from the base of Dolores's throat to the toes of her shoes, her black dress fell in long lines exquisitely moulded to her figure. That I could appreciate at a glance. But I knew that Little Popham didn't countenance figures, not in that way. But all that was as nothing compared to what I knew was shaking the community to its very foundations.

Just above the smouldering eyes, round the forehead, confining the masses of dark hair, went a gold band; from the gold band depended a carbuncle pendant. It hung between the eyes, intensifying the whiteness of the brow.

Here, indeed, was Mrs. Durnford's punishment. Had any punishment ever been more pitiless in its force?

The blackness of the gown, the whiteness of the skin, the redness of the lips — it was all too arresting and too strange.

Bacon says, "There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion."

Dolores's beauty would have met his requirements. It was certainly strange.

"Christian, Christian," whispered Margaret, "do come here." She hit the sofa beside her impatiently. "Do come, sit here. What do you think Little Popham will do?"

I said I could not imagine.

I looked at Margaret. She had always seemed to me so magnificent, so beautiful, so splendid. I looked again. Her splendour had sunk into the insignificance of a beautiful English girl in white muslin. She looked so young, so simple, her eyes child's eyes, limpid, beautiful, but not a smoulder in them.

"Christian," she whispered, "I feel like the strip of red carpet after a wedding."

I looked again at Dolores. She had turned her eyes on Curate Gray. I wondered if he was prepared and would say, like the old Scotch woman, "and noo for the boomp."

I went to the piano and played.

Every now and then a figure in black passed me, dancing as no one in Little Popham had ever danced. I was sorry for Mrs. Durnford and for Mrs. Dare; but if this excitement had to come to some English village, I was glad it had come Little Popham way.

During an interval I looked up to find the stricken face of Mrs. Durnford looking beseechingly at me.

"Do come into the conservatory, Miss Hope. I want to speak to you."

I followed the little freckled mother and we sat down.

"Well!" I said.

"Now you see!"

"She is very beautiful," I said, by way of going straight at a difficult subject; it was no use beating about the bush.

"Beautiful, Miss Hope? If you knew what I have

suffered since she came! I begged her to go out to let the village get accustomed to her, but she said she was too busy. She is beautiful in a not quite nice way. It is not the sort of beauty I can enjoy. It is beyond our station altogether. I besought her not to wear the portwine jujube sort of thing — I don't know what to call it — on her forehead, but she would. Then her dress! An artist in Paris designed it. We have always kept clear of artists! To begin with — the humbug of the thing. There 's nothing to design, no trimming, no anything! She says what fault can I find with it? Then I told her no young girl wore black in her first season. But nothing moves her. She just looked up and said, 'Young girl'! with those eyes of hers, as if she had been secretly married for years. I hope she has n't! I am so ashamed!"

"I don't see why; you ought to be very proud. Take off the pendant, put a sash round her waist —"

"Red or yellow?" said Mrs. Durnford tentatively.

I smiled. Why had Mrs. Durnford seen the impossibility of pink or blue? It was astute of her.

"It is immaterial which. Either will reduce her to the standard of Little Popham's requirements."

"Improve her?"

"From the Little Popham point of view improve her," I said; "but come and talk to Mrs. Howard about it."

Mrs. Howard welcomed her with arms outstretched. "Dear Mrs. Durnford," she said, "I have been talking to your beautiful child."

I left them, but not before I saw a tear trickle down the nose of Mrs. Durnford, and lose itself in her jabot.

I had left her in good hands. If any one could make a mother satisfied with her child, it would be Mrs. Howard.

Things seemed to go better after that.

Pat Howard was n't in the least alarmed by the pendant hanging between Dolores's eyes; neither did the plainness of her dress embarrass him, except that there was nothing much to catch hold of. But he clutched on to something, and he confided to me afterwards that she could dance like billyo!

I still played and Charlie Leslie — home from India on leave — came and sat down beside me, on the pretext of putting down the pedal for me. Really to talk about Margaret, I knew.

I remembered subalterns just like him.

"I say, Miss Hope, or do I call you Christian? — just play a bit softer — Now can you hear?"

"Not a word," I said, laughing.

"What — rot — soft pedal down — like that — now tell me! Does M. P. care for any one?"

"Charlie, let go the soft pedal."

"Never — never — never till you tell me. Is n't she lovely? D' you know I 'm going out to India again — next month — Will you find — out between this and then if — you know! And will you find out if she would be willing to live on a subaltern's pay in India? Don't thump so, dear Christian, do help a chap!"

"What do you think," I sang softly, "of Dolores Durnford?"

"Dolores? What rot! A bit too startling for my taste. I like something rather quieter."

"She 's quiet enough."

"Yes, I know, I can't make her out. Poor old doctor, what a shock for him! But Margaret?"

"Go away," I said. "I can't play if you make me laugh."

"Laugh? It 's no laughing matter! One moment, Christian, you 're an awful brick. Here, not so loud — I saw four men arrive at Selford station the other day — it was Saturday — beastly rich-looking chaps, valets and all that sort of thing — softer, please — are they after her, d' you think? Not so loud — I feel as if I should go out of my mind. Really, it 's awfully serious."

"I am afraid, dear Charlie," I sang under my breath, "that it 's no use hoping. Margaret would be a fearfully expensive wife. No use, my dear boy. She would spend all you have on silk stockings. She could n't be happy poor, and her father would never allow you to marry and live on her money."

"Hang it all, I could keep my wife in stockings!"

"Go away, dear Charlie. Ask Margaret what she spends on stockings, — silk ones."

He went. I wonder if he found out.

There were, besides Charlie, two really unhappy people that evening, so far as I knew. Mrs. Durnford, for obvious reasons, was one, Mrs. Dare the other.

The ices were warm. The crowning joy of the party had melted away.

The really dramatic moment was when Dr. Durnford walked into the room. He had been called away to a distant patient early in the afternoon, and was to come on to the party so soon as he got home.

He walked into the room, saw his daughter, stood still, and said quietly, "Lily."

Dolores answered by walking across the room to him. He put his arm in hers and they went out together.

It was very quietly done, but it was dramatic for all that.

Vespers the grocer is said to have remarked that Miss Durnford was the essence of the ball. In so doing he forgot his duty to Great Popham. But men are sometimes carried away. It was not until Dolores was carried away that we realised what her appearance meant to Little Popham.

Her mother stayed in bed to breakfast the next morning. That in itself was a thing of the deepest significance. It was a thing she had never done before, except in connection with Dolores, and that a long time ago, at the very beginning of Dolores's life, in fact.

There was no doubt that in one thing we were absolutely unfair to Lily Dolores from the very first.

Even I, as I went to sleep that night, wondered with whom she could run away. I even found myself sitting up in bed in the early morning wrestling for

the soul of Curate Gray. Now that was unfair. Because a girl happens to be born with wonderful eyes and chooses in the days of her extreme youth to wear a pendant hanging between them, there is no reason that every one should credit her with a character otherwise than exemplary. Neither is it right that they should look to her to provide them with the excitement that people living in villages consider their due.

XXIX

I KNEW exactly what would happen. The next day came a note from Lady Victoria; she wanted to see me at once.

I went, prepared to stand up for Dolores. I had not to do that. I found Lady Victoria all on her side, but treating the whole thing as a delightful comedy played for her especial benefit. The story had lost nothing in Margaret's telling.

"Do you really think, Christian," said Lady Victoria, settling down to enjoy herself, "that she was really an artist's model?"

Now this was serious.

"What a wicked thing to say!"

"My dear, why? It makes it so awfully funny — the Durnfords' daughter."

"No, it's not in the least funny. It 's an awful thing to say; in a village — a wicked thing."

"You serious darling, how dull and prosy you are!"

"Don't 'darling' me," I said.

"I won't. Describe the girl to me. Was she painted?"

"Not in the least," I said indignantly; "she is really very beautiful, and if she had worn nun's veiling she would probably have passed quite unnoticed."

"She would have deserved to!" said Lady Victoria. "But she would n't, of course. It is wonderful what girls pick up in Paris."

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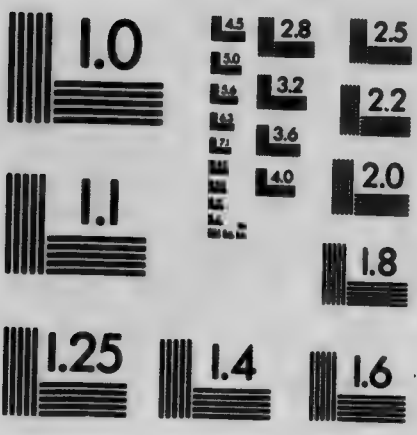

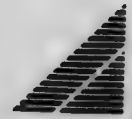

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"I am sure she has n't picked up anything in the sense you mean."

"What do I mean?"

"You know quite well; she met artists, of course."

This I felt was worthy of Mrs. Durnford; I hoped Lady Victoria would let it pass.

"Of course, that 's what I mean; I did n't mean a real model. You did n't think a real model, did you? My dear Christian, what things you jump at. Tell me about the man who designed the dress."

"I know nothing about him. The dress was absolutely plain and simple." I hesitated; I longed to tell her about the yellow or red sash. I knew she would enjoy it, but somehow or other there was no fun left in anything. Lady Victoria could be so horribly indiscreet if she chose. "Mrs. Howard thinks she is very beautiful," I said.

"Mary would. Was Mrs. Durnford very fussy? And Mrs. Dare? Do amuse me, Christian."

"No," I said, "I can't; you are taking it quite the wrong way."

"Dear Christian, I 'm not — I can't imagine why Randal finds you amusing. But go on — tell me exactly where she wore the pendant here — ?"

She pointed to the tip of her chiselled nose and raised her eyebrows.

I shook my head, and said it was a tragedy for poor Mrs. Durnford.

"You make a great mistake in taking things so seriously. I shall begin to think there is really some-

thing wrong with the girl — really. I shall expect to see her going out driving with Mary Howard every afternoon. Why do good women always take the other sort of women out driving by way of restoring to them their reputations? I am afraid the Howard ponies could never be taken very seriously. Why do good women do it?"

I laughed and shook my head, and said I was n't going to rise to that fly.

"I shall ask Sir Wallace down," said Lady Victoria.

I blushed, I know, and it was catty of her.

So altogether my visit to Great Popham was not a success.

And yet what a social success I might have been if I had told all I knew — Lord Byron's picture under Mrs. Durnford's pillow!

I ran up to the schoolroom before I went, and I found Margaret and Cynthia lying full length on their respective sofas.

"Lazy children," I said.

"Dear Christian, the excitement of the party was quite too much for us."

"Do sit down," said Margaret.

"On my sofa," pleaded Cynthia.

"I 'm the eldest," said Margaret, "and must be obeyed."

She moved her legs to make room, and I sat down.

"In five minutes, Cynthia, I will move to your sofa."

I looked at Margaret's ankles, so beautifully slim, and more particularly at her stockings. "By the way, Margaret, what do you spend on silk stockings?"

"P-i-g-l-e-t," said Margaret.

"How many is it?" I said.

"Stockings?"

"No."

"I can't help it if they will, can I?"

"I wonder; perhaps if you made a supreme effort."

"Cynthia, do like a darling fetch me that photograph of Stella — you know the one."

"I can quite well leave you and Christian alone without going on useless errands," Cynthia said, looking very hurt and dignified.

"Well, don't be stuffy, darling."

Cynthia went out, and Margaret said: "Stockings? That dear boy! I told him if ever he was in any difficulty —"

"To send for you?"

"Not exactly — that I would be his friend." She looked very sentimental at this, and I hastened to assure her what an immense comfort it was to a young man for the girl he loved to promise to be his friend.

"He was quite grateful, poor boy, and he promised me faithfully that he wouldn't think of doing anything dreadful. It makes one so frightened, doesn't it, Christian?"

I said I knew nothing more terrifying. "But the stockings, Margaret?"

"I really don't know; it must be a good deal, because

mother does n't like us to wear any that have been darned. A mother like that makes it quite impossible for us to marry poor men. I wonder why mother thinks it so awful to be poor! Are n't you awfully happy?"

"But then I 'm not married, which makes all the difference. A man is so uncomfortable, poor. He always does without the very things that matter, the really virtuous poor man, I mean. Of course, many of the poorest men are the most extravagant."

"Teddie Berkshire drove in a private hansom to borrow a fiver from a really conscientiously poor friend. That 's what you mean?"

"Yes, rather."

"Teddie 's a dear, all the same."

"That sort of man always is."

"Castlemary is rather like that, I think. He always says I look so awfully simple, he is sure it can't cost much. He little knows. How does Dolores Durnford manage to dress?"

"Very much as we all do, I expect."

"How 's that?"

"Well, we decide that it is absolutely necessary we should have a new dress and a new hat. Absolutely! We end by getting a new dressing-gown and wearing the same hat and dress."

"I can't imagine loving any one quite enough to do that."

"Then you must wait till you do."

"Dad is a dear, but it haunts me, the idea of mar-

rying and not being more frightfully excitingly happy than mother is."

I was not anxious to pursue the subject; I could not say that I thought Poppy was quite an exciting husband. Margaret, however, was rather interested.

"Cynthia is frightfully in love with Alec Viner. I don't think she could do better, really. You see Cynthia does n't ask much. She 's so frightfully docile. She says she does n't mind how many children she has. She says she won't have them down till after five in the afternoon, and never to breakfast for fear of boring Alec. The eldest boy is going to be called Vivian. She said she decided that years ago. The eldest girl is to be Prudence or Priscilla — she has n't decided which; both, if they 're twins. When the eldest boy goes to school, she says she shall often take his sisters down to see him, so that he shall not lose the softening influence of his own womenkind. The youngest girl is to play the violin very well indeed. She is going to have a real old-fashioned nurse who is going to stay with her years. Two of the girls shall wear pink and two blue. She knows exactly how curly hair should be cut. The first boy's hair is to be parted at once, so that no one shall ever take him for a girl. She is never going to be shocked at anything he tells her, and then he will never be afraid to tell her anything. When he tells her he has fallen in love with an actress she is not going to cry; she is just going to sympathise and bring him gently round to home subjects. If he marries an undesirable sort of person — Cynthia has n't

decided about that yet. She is going to tell a sort of imaginary story to Mrs. Howard and see what she says."

"Cynthia has arranged everything wonderfully, I think."

"Yes, she has taken a lot of trouble over it," said Margaret.

"Has she decided on the number of children?"

"Well, to begin with, she thinks four boys and four girls. She thinks it such a good thing to make ties at home for Alec. And as he never had any brothers and sisters, she thinks it will be young company for him, as by that time she will be rather fat, probably, and too busy to go about with him."

I said that I thought Cynthia very thorough.

I found Cynthia waiting on the staircase to catch me as I went down. "Has Margaret told you all about her affairs? it is so puzzling for her, is n't it? Could you come into my room for a moment, — I am so bothered — about a friend — of mine."

I was prepared for the friend whose boy had married an undesirable person.

Cynthia sat down and I sat beside her; she laid her hand on my knee and said, "I 'm really frightfully worried about her."

Her great big blue eyes looked frightfully worried, and I longed to say, "Don't worry, darling; the actress, let us hope, is n't born yet. If she is, it is of course a very bad case, and must be firmly dealt with."

"It 's like this — it 's — I mean supposing — only supposing — a — girl thinks — thinks a man is — in

love — by little sort — of ways — I mean the difficulty — is this — supposing — he 's thinking the — same thing — all the time, ought she — I have n't told her name, have I — because it 's — a frightful secret. It 's so difficult to say without telling too much — need she — pretend she does n't — in case he does n't. I say 'No,' because even if he — does n't, she only does it for the best."

"Yes, Cynthia, I quite see it is difficult. But it is such a comfort for her to have you to go to. You are quite right in advising her to be natural. She certainly must n't pretend to be indifferent."

"That 's what I thought," said Cynthia.

"I was afraid you were going to tell me that a friend's boy had perhaps made an unfortunate marriage or something like that."

"Well, I do know something like that, but I thought Mrs. Howard would be the best person to ask." Cynthia blushed, and said, "You are n't hurt, Christian? I go to different people for different things."

I said I was n't in the lea[illegible] nd thought she could not do better.

I told Cynthia not to wor[illegible]uch, and she promised she would n't. She said she was really most worried about Margaret.

"You see, she 's so changeable. I sympathise with her most deeply, and then the next time when she talks to me and I say little things just to show I remember, she says I am a child and don't understand. But I do, more than she thinks.

"I always feel she must marry some one very brilliant; she's not really domesticated. I can't get her to be interested in her children. She says they rather bore her. It's dreadful to be bored by children before they exist, isn't it?"

I said I thought she might be quite different when they did exist. On my way home I met Mrs. Howard. "What are you smiling at?" she said.

I told her I had just left the Popham girls.

"Isn't Cynthia a dear? I do love her big solemn eyes."

"She is the most far-seeing person I have ever met," I said.

I didn't spoil Cynthia's story. "What do you think, talking of eyes, of our new acquisition?"

"Dolores?" she asked. "I think she is a very beautiful girl — rather eccentric at present in her dress, but she will grow out of that. She seems a simple child. She told me a great deal about her life in Paris. She has been teaching for some years, taking the younger children in the school."

"It is a pity," I ventured, "that she dresses like that."

"Have you ever met a girl who didn't come back from Paris with something about her that seems *outré* to people in a country village? She will grow out of that. I very much doubt whether we shall ever see the pendant worn there again. She seems to have sat to the drawing-master for a sketch of Cleopatra. Did you ever meet a dark girl, even moderately good-look-

ing, who had n't at some time or other imagined herself like Cleopatra? The drawing-master was a cripple and therefore wonderful in the eyes of Dolores."

"Did he design her dress?"

"Yes."

"So he is the artist?"

"Well, there's no reason a drawing-master should n't be, and being lame makes it all the more probable. I can see that all her geese are swans, all cripples are poets as a matter of compensation; all misfortunes are immense, all sorrows are unbearable, the world is all cruel and hard, all love is intense, all beauty is overpowering, and so on. She is at present in the frame of mind that can only be expressed in superlatives, but she will grow out of it."

"In the mean time, Mrs. Durnford?" I said.

"She, poor dear, is very much of a hen with very, very much of a duck for child. We must do what we can for the duck."

"How?"

"Well, I shall begin with an old Irish lace collar I have. From the Parisian point of view it will spoil the dress, but it will bring it down within the limited vision of Little Popham, and she will look charming. We must teach her gradually that life is not a stage for melodrama only. Then I hope a very nice, ordinary young man will fall in love with her. He must be very healthy and normal. She will then become a useful member of society."

I wondered — could a lace collar do all that? It

was even more powerful than I had imagined a sash to be.

I wondered if I ought to say anything of Lady Victoria's point of view to Mrs. Howard, but on reflection decided not. To the safest people in a village it is better not to repeat things. Even to contradict them gives them wings with which to fly from house to house.

So Lily Dolores settled down. I, for one, cannot deny that I ran to the window every time she passed, at first, at all events. And I used to wonder what sorrow lay behind those eyes, that tragic young mouth. In fact I grew quite melancholy over Dolores, and grew to see how impossible it was that she could have allowed herself to be called by any other name. I don't believe it would be at all the same thing if a rose were called a mangle-wurzle, with all deference to Shakespeare. It might smell as sweet, but no one would think so. That, perhaps, was not his point. Dolores says it 's no use arguing with a man of his mental magnitude.

I asked Dolores one day what she was thinking of. She turned her eyes upon me, and I felt ashamed to have asked. Such thoughts were not for me, an acquaintance, to discover.

"Do you really want to know what I was thinking about?"

I braced myself up, determined, like Cynthia with her eldest son, not to be shocked by anything I might be told.

"I was thinking whether I could turn my old hat inside out, or whether I must have a new one."

"Is that all? You looked as if you had the weight of an empire on your shoulders."

"I think it would be easier to administer an empire than to make an old hat into a new one."

I expect Dolores was right. It was only another instance of man's self-imposed importance.

Jane says she sees the necessity of men. "But, miss, they do make the most of their own importance."

I agreed, but said that it seemed difficult, from some points of view, to over-rate it.

Another thing very exciting to us all was the difference Dolores made in the choir. She had such a very powerful voice that we were all very much impressed. At least, I did not like to say that I found it a little too powerful, and that it sounded a little bit to me as if she were singing into a bedroom can. I just hinted at it to Jane, and she said she preferred my voice. "Although, miss, yours is n't the kind that 's heard, is it?"

I meekly agreed. I did n't puzzle Jane by telling her that to me the timbre in a voice was everything. Besides, the word being French would upset her.

Poor little Mrs. Durnford trotted about as usual, with her hair scraped tight back under her sailor hat, with unutterable things in her eyes. Romance had run her to ground with a vengeance.

Jane amazed me by saying that Dr. Durnford had

written to Lady Victoria, apologising for Dolores's appearance at the party. I hoped he had n .. It would be too good a joke to keep to herself. How did Jane know?

I am afraid I am making a great deal of Dolores. To any one outside a village it must seem such a trivial thing. Nothing short of .. European complication is trivial to a villager.

That shows how bad it .. or us to live as we do.

Mrs. Howard has never sunk into a state of vegetation. She is always enormously interested in everything. On one occasion there was a European complication and she was pining for news. She sent into Selford to ask Vespers the latest news.

The message came back—"Mr. Vespers knew nothing more than was in the evening paper." As the evening paper was the very thing wanted, it was annoying. It also showed how very important are the Vespers .. this little world, in their own ey .. !

XXX

In spite of the tragic possibilities latent in the eyes of Dolores, I doubt whether she or any of us quite realised what sorrow was until Pat was ill. Sorrows and bad sorrows we had all known, but not a sorrow that came and sat on the threshold of every door in the village. It visited alike the houses of the rich and the poor. It filled my house, it went to bed with me, it got up with me, it darkened the sun, robbed the flowers of their scent, the birds of their song, the world of its joy, so far as we were concerned. The whole village loved Pat. To every man, woman, and child, it was their own particular friend who lay at death's door. It came quite unexpectedly, like a thief in the night—more unexpectedly. A thief in the night I have expected all my life; every creak of a wardrobe has heralded his approach. But he has never come.

I was sleeping peacefully when I was awakened by a noise—a rain of small stones against my window. I sat up in bed. I got up and opened the window. "Who's there?" I said.

"Me," said a voice; "Mrs. Durnford."

It rushed through my mind, Had something happened to Dolores? "One moment," I called.

I slipped on my dressing-gown, I stole downstairs, and slid the bolt as quietly as I could. If it was something about Dolores it was as well it should be kept as

quiet as possible. She might be brought back before it was known she had gone.

I opened the door to admit Mrs. Durnford. The first thing I noticed was that the elastic of her sailor hat was under her chin. Only an enormously violent mental upheaval could have resulted in that. She looked like a frightened child. Why should things as absurd as this strike one at such a time?

"Dear," she said, taking my hand, "we must be brave, as brave as we can, to help her."

"Her, who?" I nearly said "Dolores," but saved myself in time.

"Mrs. Howard."

"Mrs. Howard?" I whispered.

"She has done so much for us."

"What is it?" I said, the blood receding in my veins.

"Pat is very ill; the doctor is out, and we don't know where he is. I looked in his book and on his slate. There is a baby expected up at Ledfield — a first — but not yet. Then there 's some one very ill at Park Lane. He generally tells me where he is going."

"He rode?" I said.

"Yes, that 's something to go by. The road is bad up to Ledfield and to Park Lane, too."

"Well, something must be done. Some one must be sent in every direction."

"Of course; I 'm going to the Brooks first," said Mrs. Durnford. "The whole house will turn out there."

I rushed upstairs to dress. In a very few minutes I

was walking through the darkness. How strange the village seemed!

The cottage doors I knocked at were strange doors, so reserved, so silent. I had never known them so relentlessly shut. Even at my knocking they opened only after what seemed an interminable age.

The people who opened them seemed stranger than anything. But I forgot the strangeness of their night attire, so soon as the name of Pat passed my lips. We met then on familiar ground, and I knew my friends and his at once. They did not express in words what they felt. There seemed no need for it. They were all eager to help.

Why should I be the only one to do nothing? Who would search more diligently than I should for Dr. Durnford? I would go straight to Ledfield, over the common. There was plenty of room for every one. By any one of the numerous paths he might return and miss the other messengers. I prayed that by my particular path he might choose to come. Was it selfish? I should so love to do something for the Howards and for Pat. I felt quite sure that others were praying the same thing.

At first I could see nothing. I felt for the path. Having found it, there was difficulty in keeping it. "Lead, kindly Light," rang in my ears. Then by degrees my eyes became accustomed to the darkness and I found it easier to keep the path. I quickened my pace only to stumble again. If only I could find Dr. Durnford. In groping I put my arms round a

donkey's neck. At any other time I should have died of fright. It must have surprised the donkey! I stood still to listen. I heard the sound of a horse galloping. It came nearer. It must be the doctor.

I climbed up on a bank and shouted for all I was worth.

A man on a horse came right up to me and pulled up. I could just distinguish, in the lightening darkness, the pale face of a man, a young man. "Dr. Durnford?" he said.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"That's what I want to know. What are you yelling for?"

"I thought you were the doctor."

"No, I'm going for him."

"I want him. Pat's ill."

"Pat? — Go to —," he shouted. "It's my wife; he's got to come."

He galloped away, — swearing.

I stood still and thought for a moment. This clearly had to do with the Ledfield baby, a first. It was evident that Dr. Durnford had not gone there. So back to the village I went.

Dawn began to break, stealing from darkness into light. The birds in their nests greeted her with a twitter; then a chorus of song. A streak of light peeped over the moor in the east, out from the gloom stood things familiar, and the night was over.

With light came hope. Pat could not be so ill as I had imagined. The world had awakened to its perfect

beauty; but without Pat it was as nothing. No bird sang that didn't make me think of him and his "nat'ral history." The village was astir when I got back. Those who had work were going forth to their labour. Whatever happens work must be done. Pat would be the first to see that. There was no news of Dr. Durnford. I was sorry for the young man. What an awful thing it was there was no nurse at Little Popham. It might, under ordinary circumstances, have been possible to do without Dr. Durnford for a time at Ledfield.

At eight o'clock he appeared. He had ridden hard, it was evident. Beside him, stern and white, rode the farmer from Ledfield, his hand on the bridle of the doctor's horse.

"You come to my wife, doctor," he said.

"I will, I will; wait one moment." He spoke in an undertone, then he said, "I shall be in time; it will be hours yet. I must go first to see the child."

"No —!" said the farmer; it rang like a shot from a pistol! His wife was in danger, his child unborn, the doctor must come.

At that moment Dolores rode up on her bicycle. It was quite possible that Dolores should add to the tragedy of a situation; I did not expect her to bring us relief.

She slipped off her bicycle, hot and dishevelled. "I rode to fetch Dr. Barnes," she said. "I took him to Ledfield." Then turning to the farmer, she said, "He's in lots of time; he says it will be hours yet, and she

wants you. — How 's Pat?" turning to her father. — "Oh, Christian, I 'm so hot!"

I went up to the Howards to see if I could do anything to amuse the children. Peggy seemed to understand that something strange and terrible was happening. Jack found it an excellent opportunity to play with Pat's toys, unreproved, and Baby sang hymns with deepest fervour. I read to them. They chose Pat's favourite books, which was very trying.

"Don't we have funny meals when people are ill?" said Peggy.

"J-ust l-ike we have when the s-weep comes," said Jack.

Peggy was crying; she was ashamed that she could have thought anything funny when Pat was ill.

After I had helped to put them to bed after the longest day I had ever spent, I went downstairs and I met Mr. Howard.

When I saw him I wondered if the joy of having children could compensate for agony like this.

He asked if I would wait and hear what the doctor from London said. I nodded. I went downstairs, and waited.

Hours later, it seemed to me, Nannie came down.

"Would you please, miss, see that the doctor has something to eat? Mr. Ho d said, would I ask you. He did n't say whether y were to say supper or breakfast," and she laughed and I laughed.

"Fancy me laughing," she said, "and him lying there."

We both cried. How near is laughter to tears in the most tragic moments in life.

"I don't believe there 's much hope, miss. They tell us so, but I can't hope. Whatever shall we do? He's always been a child that you couldn't help loving!"

When I got home I found Jane either waiting up for me, or perhaps she had got up early. "How is he?" she asked.

"Just the same, Jane."

"The doctor from London came?"

"Yes, he came; he has been there all night."

"He 's a physician, I suppose, miss?"

"I suppose he is."

"A physician drives two horses, miss."

"I see. He is certain to be a physician."

"Fancy not finding Dr. Durnford, miss!"

"Yes, wasn't it terrible?" I said.

"And the poor woman at Ledfield! She 's one of the piano-playing sort, miss."

"Does that make any difference?"

"All the difference in the world. She 'd be certain to be bad, poor thing!"

"There was a bad accident somewhere. The doctor had been there."

"What 's this about Miss Lily?"

"She was splendid. She went and fetched Dr. Barnes and took him to Ledfield."

"Why didn't she bring him for Master Pat?"

"Well, because he isn't a good diagnoser and so wouldn't do for Master Pat."

"What does that word mean, miss?"

"Diagnose? It means finding out what is the matter with people."

"Well, he'll be all right at Ledfield; that doesn't take much finding out, does it? So Miss Lily's got some sense, it seems."

"She was quite splendid, Jane. Oh, I'm so tired!"

"Don't cry so, miss," said Jane. "Is there something more than just this? If you could forget for once that I'm not a lady and all that, and tell me what it all means. I'm your old Jane who has cared for you since you were a child. It's been a struggle all these years to do what you've said and never argue!"

The pathos of it!

"Dear Jane," I said, hugging her, "you know there is nothing I wouldn't tell you before any one."

"It's all Master Pat?"

"Of course, Jane; what could be worse?"

"Well, you haven't known him so very long, and you're not one so set on children as a rule. If — it's — a man that's bothering you!"

For the second time that day I laughed through my tears. Jane was getting as melodramatic as Dolores. What could be worse than Pat hopelessly ill?

What sorrow could any man bring me more poignant than this?

XXXI

One of the first things Pat did when he got better was to ask to see me. I went up longing to see him, afraid to see him, afraid of showing emotion. He was in his mother's room. I looked. The bed seemed so large, that at first I saw nothing. Then I heard a little laugh, heart-breaking in its smallness. It came somewhere from the middle of the bed. I saw a little face, with such big eyes! Pat, but so different.

His mother distracted his attention while I grew accustomed to this new and pathetic Pat.

"Well?" he said. By that I knew him to be the same Pat.

"Well," I said, "it is lovely to see you again."

"Has anybody caught anything lately?"

"In my stream? No, no one but you shall fish there. The fish are waiting for you!"

"The fish are waiting for me, mother, she says."

"Are they, darling? They must wait a little longer."

"Will they?" he said, turning to me.

"Of course, as long as you like."

"They won't like it when I do catch them. Only I don't so very often."

"You will soon be quite well," I said.

"Shall I, mother?"

"Yes, darling, very soon. Show Christian what we were looking at."

"My nat'ral history book! You know! We were looking at this."

He showed me a picture of a hippopotamus, and I said I wondered why the hippopotamus had been made so ugly.

"To attract the opposite sex, I think it was," said Pat, "or else for protection — I forget which — you know, like when twigs are made like caterpillars!"

"You know such a lot of natural history, Pat," I said.

"Yes, I do, a good lot! It's a long time to be in bed," he added. "But I can see birds and things out of the window sometimes. I can just see Mr. Brook's cows going over the common, in the distance. I can see which is Daisy and which is Blossom. I hope the summer won't quite go before I get up!"

It did not quite go. But some part of the summer that Pat enjoyed was spent away from Little Popham. His mother went with him, and among the people who came to stay with Mr. Howard was the Tinker. I imagine it was then that Mr. Howard expressed in hard cash his belief in the Tinker and his wares. I did not know it at the time. I imagined he had come to Little Popham on other business.

My sentimentality always leads me astray. I don't know what, in the first place, made me connect in my mind the Tinker with Dolores. But so soon as I thought of them safely married, I could think of nothing else.

Nothing could be more matrimonially suitable.

Little Popham was too small a place for Dolores.

Her eyes needed a wider scope of vision. Then there was her character. His enthusiastic optimism was exactly what was wanted to counteract her melodramatic pessimism.

He came to see me one day and found me in the garden. He did not, like Mr. Dare, despise the comfortable part of a garden roller to sit on. But he sat on it, and found it so comfortable that he sat on and on and talked so much that I thought he was never going. By way of interesting him I had told him — in the early part of his visit — of Dolores's gallant attempt to find her father the day Pat was taken ill; finer still, her gallant determination that the farmer's wife should n't have him. I described her ride to Dr. Barnes, and how she took him by force to Ledfield, and how she came home again in time to send the farmer back. I made quite a picturesque story of it, and he listened.

"She looks a little strange," he said, at the end of it.

"She is very striking looking," I said.

"Striking? Yes. I question the happiness of the husband whose wife is always the subject of speculative admiration. I should, for my taste, like something quieter."

I was pleased at the way he took it, quite personally.

"So she would be," I said, "she really would be."

I forgot in my fervour that I was taking an unwarranted interest in the affairs of the Tinker.

"She might, she might," he mused; "I must own I had had other hopes."

Here he fixed his eyes on me, whether intentionally, or because I happened to be in his line of vision, I don't know.

"It was fine sending off the man who could n't diagnose to the case that did n't require it," he said thoughtfully. "She is very feminine. I noticed that the first time I saw her."

We talked of other things, but he came back to Dolores.

"What is her name — exactly?" he said.

"Well, exactly," I said, "it is Lily; inexactly, Dolores."

"She must n't labour under such a doleful name as that," he said, smiling; "it is bad for any one."

"She chose it."

"Which shows how bad it is."

The Tinker has a habit of coming to call, always within a few hours of a meal. That he has no ulterior motive I know. And when the meal is luncheon or tea, it does n't matter. But at dinner Jane draws the line. On this occasion I wondered what would happen. It was past dressing time; the Tinker talked on; the shadows grew longer, the Tinker talked on; it grew quite chilly, the Tinker talked on; I suggested going indoors, the Tinker went in and talked on! Why did n't Jane announce dinner and be done with it? I had really arrived at the age when I might dispense hospitality to any man, certainly to one with a face

like the Tinker's. He inspired the most timorous of women with a feeling of perfect safety.

In course of time Jane announced, "Miss Durnford."

She hoped she was n't late. I wondered if I looked as surprised as I felt.

Then dinner was announced. It was laid for three, in Jane's best manner. Nothing was cold. It had n't been kept, that was certain. It struck nine as Jane put down the first soup-plate.

My Jane-imposed dinner went off very well. The Tinker, I could see, was really interested in Dolores. He met most of her tragic utterances with a tenderly expressed, "Too bad, too bad."

But her enthusiasm finally fired him, and I took a back seat and listened.

They spoke of two very different worlds. Dolores's world was so wicked. The Tinker's world was another altogether, and that his world was an infinitely larger one was an argument on his side. Towards the end of the evening he expressed a desire to show his world to Dolores. As to Dolores showing him hers, why, it lay at his feet! He had only to look round him to see the suffering and sadness in Little Popham alone.

Whereupon the Tinker looked at me and then at Dolores, and finally seemed satisfied to remain looking at her. So long did he look at her that the smouldering, swimming eyes were unable to meet the intensity of his gaze, and they looked away. A pink flush stole over her cheeks, and finally crept all over her face, giving it just that colour it needed. Dolores was dan-

gerously attractive then. Her eyes had set fire to the Tinker. But about her world! He asked her — just out of curiosity. Supposing — high up — against a blue sky, outlined, she saw an animal, an antelope, for instance! Would she say, "What a life! What glorious liberty! What an existence! What a beautiful animal!" or would she say, "Poor thing, he will fall! he will be dashed to pieces against the rocks! What a horrible death!"

"I should hope he would be careful," said Dolores.

That's how it all began — at my suggestion — I verily believe, and at Jane's dinner party.

That evening when I closed the door on the Tinker and Dolores, I said to Jane, "Who asked Miss Dolores to dinner?"

"I did, miss," said Jane. "I could n't have you dining alone with a gentleman. So I put back dinner and sent word to Miss Durnford to come, giving the invitation as from you, of course."

"How surprised she must have been!"

"Her surprise does n't matter to me, miss, so long as your reputation was saved. I think, if you marry any one, miss, it ought not — in common fairness — to be Mr. Melfort. Not but what he 's a nice enough gentleman, but queer, I should say."

"If Miss Durnford had said anything about being asked so suddenly, it would have placed me in a very awkward position."

"I told her not to when I took off her cloak. I said you did n't wish it commented upon."

How puzzled poor Dolores must have been. I said to Jane, "Was it right to allow Miss Durnford to walk home with Mr. Melfort, or the other way round?"

Jane said, "I never promised Miss Durnford's father to look after her. I did yours, miss; and I'll do it. Did you ask Mr. Melfort to wash his hands?"

"Oh, Jane, I did n't."

"I put a clean towel for him, miss."

"But you see, Jane, I did n't know he was going to stay to dinner."

"There 's the kind of gentleman that always does stay without dressing, and the kind that does n't," said Jane oracularly. "You can't be expected to know them at your age, perhaps."

As a matter of fact, I did, now that Jane suggested it. It generally has something to do with the kind of tie a man wears, and the way he ties it.

Jane thought the collar more, but there were several ways of telling.

XXXII

No one realises more than I do the influence Mrs. Howard had on every one from the moment she came into the village. From the very first she had us all in affectionate submission. There were gradually evidences in Mr. Dare's sermons of a tendency to think more of love and less of sin — that was significant. Mrs. Durnford seemed to change day by day into something softer; retaining her characteristics of which I, for one, am glad. The whole village seemed different in some intangible way. All of which things I feel should be put down to the influence of Mrs. Howard. But in the matter of Mrs. Dare and in justice to her, I question whether the very unexpected change in her life could in any way be attributed to Mrs. Howard.

No doubt once the fact was known, Mrs. Howard helped her to face the village and the new conditions of life. Also I allow that without Mrs. Howard, references other than kind, if only of a joking nature, might have been made at Mrs. Dare's expense.

The first I heard of it was from Lady Victoria. I was walking, she was driving. She pulled up her ponies and told me to get in.

"My dear Christian, for a woman with a sense of humour, Mary Howard certainly extracts the most extraordinary promises from her friends. She wants me not to laugh! You know about Mrs. Dare?"

She did n't wait to hear if I did.

"It really is too quaint. What it will be like I can't imagine! Mr. Dare already goes about as if the world belonged to him. It really is funny, — after all these years, too. Poor dear Mrs. Dare! She always blushed when she cut out babies' clothes at the working parties!"

"What has happened to Mrs. Dare?" I asked.

"Really, Christian, you are strangely unobservant. Now, of course, it can't be a secret. That 's, no doubt, why Mary told me. I 'm so glad; Poppy says I never tell him anything amusing."

Then it dawned upon me. There was something pathetic about the thing. I wished Mrs. Howard had told me of it.

I took the first opportunity of going to call on Mrs. Dare. As I went into the drawing-room I saw her sitting in the window, and she hastily hid something behind the sofa cushion. That was unnecessary. In a vicarage drawing-room, work of all kinds has its appointed place. Baby clothes are of all things the most to be expected. There were tears in Mrs. Dare's eyes as she rose to meet me.

"Dear," she said, "you don't think any the worse of me?"

I laughed softly and drew her down on to the sofa.

"Dear Mrs. Dare, if the truth were known, we have sometimes felt the vicarage to be a little incomplete, although we have never complained."

"Yes, but after all these years! I feel I can't face the people."

I reassured her. I said how interested they would all be, which was true.

"Who told you?" she said.

"Lady Victoria."

"I should have liked it to have been Mrs. Howard. She makes it sound quite natural and beautiful, and," she pathetically added, "it does n't seem to strike her as funny. Lady Victoria thinks anything of the kind happening — to any one — not young — and beautiful — you understand? — is funny."

I never felt so fond of Mrs. Dare.

I left her alone with her wonderful and overpowering secret. What a pity it was it had n't come to her earlier when it would n't have caused any one amusement. To be fair to every one, it must be remembered how very prim Mrs. Dare looked.

A few days later I chanced upon Miss Dorinda. She knew Mrs. Dare's secret. She was interested, very interested, and a little appalled.

"It robs us, dear, of the sense of perfect security we have enjoyed, you and I."

I looked at her. She was quite serious.

"I mean," she added, "as regards surprises of too exciting a nature."

"Oh yes," I said.

The secret was scarcely the property of every one, when into the vicarage stole a tiny guest. Perhaps he was n't sure of his welcome; perhaps he was shy; perhaps he thought his mother did n't look quite what a mother should look; perhaps the rooms were too stiffly

furnished; perhaps everything was too tidy; perhaps he looked into the pantry and saw no mug, into the storeroom and saw only quince jelly and black currant jam; perhaps he did n't understand his father's manner; perhaps he was afraid of scratching the mahogany furniture, of putting sticky fingers on the piano, or of splashing water on the bathroom floor! Perhaps, a thousand things. Anyhow he decided he could n't stay, he really could n't. He did n't feel at home — not from the very first. So he gently laid his face against his poor, tired, funny little mother's face, and begged to be excused.

The pressure of his face against hers must have been very, very gentle, seeing how very small a baby he was; but it went deep, so deep that the impression is left there, and can never get rubbed out. He must have explained to her very gently, since it left no trace of bitterness, why it was that a boy could n't be happy in such a very, very tidy house, with parents not young enough to understand a boy's ways. Boys are so rough!

That she understood is evident, because she said to me the first time I saw her, "Perhaps we could n't have made him happy. My husband might not have understood a boy's ways, or I might not have. But I rather think I should have got accustomed to them. He was a beautiful boy." Then later, she said, "I realise for the first time that sinners — even the worst — must have been at some time the babies of mothers. It makes me feel very differently towards them, — quite differently."

So Baby Dare had done something even in his very

short life. But the tragedy of it! How our hearts ached! No baby was ever more deeply mourned by his parishioners than Howard Dare.

Mrs. Dare was very ill, and when she was better she went to the seaside. She came back quite strong, really quite strong. The way she insisted on that was sufficiently pathetic, but much more so was just that difference in her face which only a few people understood.

Poor Mrs. Dare lost her baby, but in losing him gained the whole world of children. It was not much consolation to her at first, if she knew it even, until it gradually began to dawn upon her that the children no longer hid their faces in their mothers' aprons when she passed, as they used to do.

Then she began to think and to realise what door it was that was thrown open to her. She passed through it, shy and trembling; and when the children offered her the best of their treasures, she took them, no matter how sticky they were.

In every baby she saw hers. In every boy what he might have been, and in a few men what she would have wished him to be!

Jane said she could n't see a baby at the vicarage.

"There are things that seem right and things that seem wrong! And a baby there seems funny somehow or other! Dull for the child, too, it would have been. Although he could have gone to Mrs. Howard's in the afternoons for a bit, to be made into a proper sort of child, so to speak."

XXXIII

MEANWHILE the Tinker came and went among us, and even I began to look into my purse to see if somewhere, hidden away, was any money I could spare. After all, I could well spare any money that should be returned to me doubled, redoubled in an incredibly short space of time. It seemed foolish not to take the opportunity when it offered.

I don't know what made me write to Randal Grey before doing so. But I did. I wrote and told him of everything that I thought would interest him, then woman-like I left the postscript for the most important thing of all. "I am going to buy Mount Melforts."

That off my mind, I set myself to serious business.

Multiplying to me was always the easiest form of calculation. No woman readily subtracts. It is against her nature. So are such things as allowing for sinking funds and depreciations! Those horrible forms of self-repression that rob men of all the joy they might have in possession. I sometimes wonder if they allow for depreciation when they choose their wives. I dare say they do. It spoils the romance, doesn't it?

The day after I had written to Randal, I went down the village, armed with a list of things necessary to the good of my household, and went in to Mrs. Barley's to satisfy its needs. Her eyes glistened when I read

out the items. How thankful she must be that Maud is not what she calls a good manager.

It is curious that from purely selfish motives one should have to approve what one most despises.

In becoming a shopkeeper Mrs. Barley robbed the world of bachelors of an excellent housekeeper.

Having made my purchases, I left.

Before I had gone many yards I remembered I had forgotten something of the greatest importance. So back I went.

Mrs. Barley was not in the shop. I tinkled the bell. She came in a few minutes and handed me a telegram. "This has just come for you, miss."

I opened the damp flap, avoiding with care its extreme stickiness, and read the telegram.

"You won't be wanting these things, then, miss," she said, wistfully, as she laid her hand affectionately on the piece of streaky bacon.

"Yes, of course I shall, Mrs. Barley."

I was too busy thinking, to wonder why she asked me the question. As I walked down the village I took the telegram out of my pocket and re-read it.

"Don't buy anything till you hear from me."

Poor Mrs. Barley, no wonder she had been apprehensive.

I was a little apprehensive myself. But I remembered with relief that I had often accused Randal of being a pessimist. It was possible to be too cautious. The Tinker, after all, must know better than any one else what Mount Melforts were worth.

I felt almost sure that the whole village were more or less involved. The Tinker could n't have taken the savings of people like the Durnfords, for instance, without being fairly certain that things were all right.

What was their money to him who talked so glibly in thousands?

The Tinker was nothing if not honest. One had only to look at him to see that. Of course, Randal said, he might with perfect honesty believe in a thing that was absolutely unsound.

Poppy had dreaded the arrival of a tinker. My heart stood still at the thought of the Howards losing their money — Old Mr. Wallace's money. It would be too awful.

As I walked along deep in dismal thought, Poppy rode up.

"You 're the very person I want, Christian. Victoria wants you to come up this afternoon. She 's not well. I hope she 's not sickening for anything. Do come."

I said I would. I did not care to stay alone with thoughts of the Howards ruined. I wondered how much they had put into Mount Melforts.

"I 'll come up quite early," I said.

"That 's right! I 'll tell Victoria; she 'll be awfully pleased. I think you 'll see a great change in her, Christian!"

A change in Lady Victoria? What did the man mean?

I walked up to Great Popham in the afternoon,

and I found Lady Victoria lying down in the boudoir, with drawn blinds.

I was really frightened when I heard gasps coming from the sofa. This was serious! Sickening for anything? What an idiot Poppy was! Of course, she must be seriously ill.

When I got near enough to see, I found that the gasps were from laughing. "Oh, Christian, for heaven's sake, come here! I 've been having such fun."

"You are a wretch to frighten me like that," I said. "Poppy was afraid you were sickening for something."

"Poppy will be the death of me."

"Do tell me what 's the matter."

"Well, it 's really all Mary Howard's fault. I adore her, but I 'm sick to death of hearing her praises sung. It 's her goodness all day long! With a husband there 's no escape! Even in the sanctity of my bedroom I can't be sure that Mary's goodness won't follow me. I tell Poppy he 's no business to talk of other women in my bedroom. But he can't help it. He 's infatuated. He tells me there is a marked change in every one in the village. Look at Mrs. Dare! I told him I could not see what Mary had to do with that. In fact, I don't believe she is answerable for anything. It 's her smile, which of course she can't help. It 's a thing a person is born with. I should have been firm, long ago, and prevented Poppy coming into my room at all. He sat on my tiara the other night. It was worse for him than for me, of course, but it was

very tiresome. He likes to watch me dress. It hinders fearfully. It means such manœuvring on the part of Pullar. She says the last lady she was with never let her husband know about her hair. I don't like to tell her that I don't mind in the least. She is so anxious that I should be like her last lady! Why should every one want to improve me, Christian?"

"There is so much room for it. But do go on. Tell me what has happened, and why you are lying sick unto death."

"Well, I got too tired of Mary's goodness. As I said before, Poppy was always going on about the way she visits the poor and so on. So I thought I would go out and find some one to visit. See? So off I started. Every one was disgustingly well. I got tired of hearing the same story and every one looked so astonished to see me. It was most disconcerting! It does n't encourage one to become good.

"Finally I found a stable-boy who had had a fall and was suffering from bruises. I felt that Mary would have found something much more romantic; but there, I had to put up with what I could get. He was in bed, because he could n't sit down. I did n't see how I was going to work that up into pathos for Poppy.

"The boy's mother was so careful in her explanations that it gave me a chance to think the illness what I liked. She hummed and hawed so and was so genteel that I was at perfect liberty to think the illness a catching one. I said to her, copying as well as I could Mary's smile, 'My good woman, if the child has been

asking for me all night, you ought to have sent for me!'

"If you could have seen her face, Christian! She 'my ladied' me, and I was so afraid that she was going to say that he had n't asked for me. It would have spoilt the story for Poppy. Think how happy Poppy would be if he could think that from all the cottages at night there went up cries for me! From a purely political point of view, it would be so valuable, a party cry!

"I told Mrs. Capp that I would come back and read to the boy. I came home and fetched Jorrocks. I found Mrs. Capp all in a flutter waiting for me. 'Is he quiet?' I asked. She said he was quite quiet.

"I asked if he had ceased calling for me. And she said he was ready to see me. It was clever of her to get out of it like that. Then she said he was rather shy, and would my ladyship excuse him? I went up to Joseph's room."

Lady Victoria spoke as if there were dozens of rooms.

"And his mother told him to touch his head," she continued.

"He was the ruddiest, most flourishing invalid I had ever seen; but that I could not help.

"I asked him if the pain was very bad, and he grinned.

"Then I said I would read to him, and he grinned again.

"He made frantic signs to his mother, and she came to the rescue, and said: 'Joner, he likes best, m'lady, he's a terrible weakness for animals.'

"'Yes, Joner — where he 's swallered.'

"I felt quite faint, Christian. Does Mary have to face these difficulties? I believe opportunities fall into her lap. Why do I have to go out and find them for myself?

"Well, his mother went on to tell me that he was terribly interested in whales ever since he had been to Margate and had n't seen one.

"Then, of course, I guessed it was Jonah!

"Mrs. Capp handed me the Bible, and I did n't know where Jonah was. The place, she told me, generally opened of itself. It did, luckily, and I began to read, very solemnly and very slowly, and the wretched boy began to laugh — to the intense horror of his mother. She told me that he was upset and that it would be better perhaps if 'my ladyship' were to read more cheerful-like. 'He looks upon it as a cheerful passage, m'lady' — she said that, Christian — 'and he 's accustomed to laugh, m'lady, but not like this.'

"She went on to say that Joseph thought it was a funny situation for a gentleman to find himself in.

"Then, Christian, I turned to Jorrocks. 'Now, Joseph,' I said, 'this is Jorrocks. Your father will know all about Jorrocks!'

"I was showing him the picture when he burst out, 'No blooming whale would n't swallow 'im.'

"He roared; he said something about no blooming whale would n't swallow that ere pill — quite horribly vulgar, Christian. He kicked with delight. I begged

him — in Mary's best manner — to remember his bruises, and he said they were n't on his legs.

"You can imagine the state I was in when I came home. The difficulty was to make the story sufficiently sad to please Poppy. I think I have managed it. Oh, Christian, Poppy will be the death of me!"

"You are too wicked," I said.

"But he 's so pleased. He thinks I am so womanly. My only fear is that he 'll go and see the boy for himself. He would so love the boy to speak of me with tears in his eyes. Mercifully he is terrified of infection. Now I want you to make it all right with Poppy. I 'm so tired of staying here in the dark. Tell him I 'm not going to be ill, but that I have run an enormous risk, will you?"

I went into the hall where Poppy was having tea, and I found him preoccupied, eating cake. I poured out a cup of tea and sat down.

"D' you think she 's going to be ill, Christian?"

"No, I don't think so. She 's upset, of course — at finding the boy ill."

"Poor Victoria, she 's not accustomed to suffering. It was good of her to read to the little beggar. Awfully — touching — his asking — for her all night. By Jove! — we don't realise the devotion. It 's wonderful the influence of a good woman in the place. If it had n't been for Mary Howard, Victoria would n't have thought of it. She *has* made a difference in the place, has n't she?"

"She certainly has," I said.

"You were all right before she came, Christian."

"Oh, no," I said hastily.

"Yes — you were! Mrs. Durnford's quite different, I hear. And Mrs. Dare, — but that's something to do with the baby, eh? Still it may have had something to do with Mary as well. She's so womanly, is n't she?"

We talked a great deal about the influence of good women, and then he said, "To change the subject, what do you think of the Durnford girl?"

I said I did n't see that we had changed the subject, and Poppy shook his head and looked wise. "She 's handsome, is n't she?"

I said she was.

"Christian," he said, "where does she get it from?"

I said I had n't the least idea.

"I heard that Melfort chap call her Dolly," he said.

This was news. "Did you?" I said.

"Yes, — 'Dolly.'" Poppy drew his chair near to mine and lowered his voice. "Yes — 'Dolly.' It was at the railway station, and he said, 'Good-bye, Dolly.' That means something, does n't it?"

"It means enormously much," I said.

"How?"

"Well, it means that he is a very brave man. Imagine calling any one with eyes like that — Dolly. It means also that Mount Melforts are all right. He could n't — well, you know he could n't let her people in for a bad thing — if he is fond of her; and he must be fond of her to call her — Dolly. And she of him to let him."

"Are they in Mount Melforts?"

Poppy frowned when I said, "Yes."

"Dear, dear!" he said.

"We — all — are, I am afraid," I said hesitatingly.

"Not Mary Howard?"

"The Howards are."

"D——!" said Poppy. "Just as they are happy and comfortable. It 's too bad. Why did n't you tell me, Christian?"

"How could I?"

"You 're not in?" he said.

"Just a little."

"Oh, Christian!"

"It does n't matter for me one scrap."

"You 're not running an open account?"

"No, I bought mine."

"And the Howards?"

"I don't know; certain to have bought."

Poppy got up and paced up and down the hall.

"Look here, Christian," he said, "you find out for me — see? — to what extent the Howards are in; make a point of it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Never you mind — you find out — see?"

"It 's a little difficult."

"Not a bit of it. Find out through — Dolly."

Dolly! I said I would try.

Puffin was staying at Great Popham. It was delightful to renew his acquaintance.

He came into the hall after tea, and walked solemnly

round the table. "D' you remember me, Puffin?" I said.

He nodded. "Are those chocolate?" he said, pointing to some cakes. I said I thought they were.

"Would you like to know?" he asked.

I said I would very much.

"Then I 'll just try," he said.

He took one large bite — frowned — by no means convinced — took another and finished it. "Yes, they are," he said, twirling round on one leg. "I knew they were!"

"So did I," I said.

He looked at me.

"You are a scoundrel, Puffin! Do you remember me?"

He nodded.

"Say yes."

"No," he said.

"Puffin, you 're a ragamuffin!"

"That 's poetry," he said.

It had n't occurred to me.

"Does it still talk?" he asked.

"The raven?" I said.

"That shows I remember," he said. "Shall we play at something?"

"What shall we play at?"

"Soldiers?" he said.

I said yes, and he fetched the soldiers and we set them out. I was Boers and Puffin was English.

I remonstrated with him at last, and said, "But

you know, Puffin, the Boers did win some battles."

"Yes," he said, "but that was before John Winter went into the army."

"Who was John Winter?" I asked.

"You don't know who John Winter was? — Well — "

I felt frightfully crushed.

"He was a garden boy. Do you know who James is?"

I said I did n't.

"Well, he 's the best bowler in the whole world — I should think he was. Anyhow, he bowled Dad out first ball — left hand, too!"

I was very much impressed.

"Have you come to stay?" he asked.

I said I had not.

"If you had," he said, "I would have come to see you in bed to-morrow morning. I might have, might n't I?"

"Of course, Puffin; I should have been delighted."

"At six, would you have been delighted?"

"Well, I almost think seven would have been better."

"Mother thinks that."

Then he added, "Does any one sleep with you in your bed?"

"No, no one."

"Does any one sleep with Jane?"

I was anxious to change the subject, so I asked how Billy was.

"He 's all right. Does any one?"

I said no. I asked where Billy was.

Puffin said, "He 's here."

I said I was glad.

"Why are you?" he said.

"Because I should like to see him."

"Would you?"

He evidently wondered what in the world I should want to see Billy for.

"Shall I fetch him?"

"Yes, do," I said.

He went to the foot of the staircase and roared, "Bill—ay!"

"He never comes when he 's called," said Puffin, walking off in high dudgeon.

XXXIV

A FEW days later I met Poppy in the village.

"It was awfully good of you, Christian, to find out about those shares. I 've managed it all right. I did it through my stock-brokers — in their name, of course — so that my name should n't appear. I bought the shares at a price Mr. Howard could n't very well refuse. I 'm thankful to think I managed it. There 's nothing I would n't do for Mary Howard!"

"You stand to lose a good deal, then?" I asked.

"That I don't mind a hang. I was always afraid the Howards would lose what they had."

"You said a tinker would come along."

"I said — a tinker!" said Poppy, bewildered. "Where does the tinker come in?"

"No, Lady Victoria said, I remember, when the Howards first came, that you said that if a tinker came along with the kettle to sell that Mr. Howard would look at his face, and if that was all right, he 'd buy the kettle."

"Did I?" said Poppy, quite pleased. "Victoria remembers witty things; she stores them up. I forget all the things I say.".

"It has turned out so true, as far as we know. Mr. Melfort's face is a great danger."

"Nice looking chap, ain't he? Jolly looking?"

"Yes, very," I said, "with that boyish smile of his

which is rather attractive in men generally, though dangerous in salesmen in particular."

"What I was going to say," said Poppy, "was that there 's nothing I would n't do for Mary Howard. Look what she 's done for Victoria! Softened her so —you know about that boy — reading to him — by Jove! it may make all the difference to him — at the critical time of his life, too. Of course, she ought to have done it years ago. The poor people like the Bible. It does n't do 'em any harm either!"

I looked at Poppy. He was quite serious.

What a shame it was of Lady Victoria!

"You won't say anything about those shares, will you, Christian? It does n't matter if they do go down now. I 've written them off already. You have n't got many, have you?"

"Only a few. I 'll sell them to you."

"No, Christian, I 've bought as many as I want. My advice is, sell and regret. Not much regret, either — they 're bound to slump. I 'm told there 's nothing in them. D' you suppose he 's going to marry the Durnford girl?"

I said I expected he would, and Poppy said, "It was d—— odd." Why, I don't know. He was immensely interested in Dolores himself, so why should n't the Tinker be too?

"By the way, Christian, I forgot — what do you think I heard this morning? Billy said to Puffin, 'I had a dream last night.' 'Nothin' in that,' said Puffin; 'what did you dream?' 'I dreamt I went to Heaven,'

said Billy. Puffin perked up at this. 'Did you see Moses?' he said. Billy paused and then said, 'No, Moses was out flying.' Good for Billy, was n't it?"

I told Poppy I should have liked to see Billy, and he said, "Billy is all right, but he does n't come up to Puffin."

That I knew meant that Puffin some day gets Popham and Billy does not.

Several telegrams of some importance passed through Mrs. Barley's hands that day. One was handed to Poppy as he and I were talking together. He opened it in the way that a man does who gets dozens in a day. "A telegram? That 's nothing; give it to me."

He read it, he grew pink, red, crimson. "I say!" he said, "this is unfortunate."

"Bad news?" I said.

"It is," he said.

My cottage was so near I begged him to come in. He followed me. He sat down and pushed the telegram across the table to me. I read "Mount Melforts strong, market rising."

"Poppy!" I said; then I remembered that I never called him Poppy.

"Sir Popham," I corrected myself.

"For God's sake, don't 'Sir Popham' me."

"They 're bound to go down," I said. The grandfather clock in the corner ticked, — tick - tock - tick - tock.

Poppy sat with the telegram crushed in his hand,

the picture of despair. "I always do make a mess of things!" he said.

Jane came in and handed me a telegram. I opened it as a woman does who receives very few. It was from Randal. "Hold on, Melforts booming."

"What is it?" said Poppy.

"Nothing," I answered.

"Imagine me making money out of the Howards!" he said.

He went off terribly depressed. At the door he met Jane bringing another telegram. He groaned. I opened it quite calmly. They were becoming quite every-day things. "Are they down?" he said.

"Randal is coming down this afternoon."

I wondered what he was coming for. I wondered if it could be news from India.

I waited for him in the garden. I always like to see people out of doors, especially if there is something in the interview to be dreaded. There was a good deal in this one I dreaded.

"Christian," he said, going straight to the point, "I am going to ask you to trust me and tell me that story. There is no reason now that I should n't know it."

"Then why should I tell it?" I said. "It is so silly — so pitifully silly!"

"Because I want you to," he said simply.

It seemed to me reason enough. After all, why should n't I tell him anything?

"Sit down."

He sat down.

"First of all," I said, "tell me about Mount Melforts."

"Mercenary young woman! Well, I think you may find yourself an heiress one of these days."

"Seriously?"

"Quite seriously. Of course, it depends on how much you put in, — and on your ideas as to what constitutes an heiress."

"You mean it's all right?"

"Very much all right, I'm told."

"Poor Poppy!" I thought.

"Well, Christian!"

"You know, of course, that Violet and I went out to be with my father, and you know, of course, that we were twins and exactly alike, so much so that it was a joke wherever we went."

"I could tell the difference."

"You could, of course, because Violet was so much prettier."

He made a movement of dissent, which was nice and polite of him.

"Well, she married at eighteen — as you know. She was very pretty, very frivolous, very delicious. She had the fortune or misfortune to marry a man so good as to be intolerant towards any one less good than himself. He looked for perfection in his wife. No doubt he was right, but Violet was incapable of being all he wished her to be. Another man might have made her so, he could n't.

"Sir Wallace was in some way irresistible to many

women, Violet among them, apparently. I hated him. Eustace admired him both as his chief and a man. He seemed to see evil where none existed, and to be blind to it in cases where to others it was apparent."

I know if this were a real novel I should describe the effect my story had upon Randal as I went along.

He should, from time to time, — properly speaking, — knock the end off his cigarette — or perhaps the situation was too grave to admit of smoking. Well, then, he should give starts of disapproval — and make gestures of impatience — perhaps exclamations of sympathy. He might frown — his strong face might look stronger as I proceeded — his knuckles might become white as he clenched his hands. He would most certainly draw on the gravel path with the point of his walking-stick and — hearts, if he were very much in love with me.

He may have done all these things, but my impression is that he did none of them. He leaned forward, his arms on his knees, his hat drawn over his eyes. Knowing him as I do, I can guess what his expression was.

I felt how nice it was of him not to burst out laughing. Of course, the funny part of my story was to come. Funny as I thought it, I did not know how much funnier it really was.

"Father died — I can't speak of that — you know nearly everything, you see! Well, I stayed on with Eustace and Violet. Now comes the absurd part of the story! I always wore pink and Violet always wore

blue. That became a joke in the station. Our partners always said it was the only means of identification. It was our boast that although Violet was married we still dressed alike, except for the distinction in colour. I mean, even if we wore white, I wore pink ribbons — she blue — it's so silly!"

"Please go on. I like you in blue best, all the same; go on."

"Well, one night we went to a ball, and for a joke we changed. I wore blue and Violet pink. Bruce had come down from the frontier — that has nothing to do with the story —"

"Except that you were very happy!"

"What has to do with the story is that we sat in the garden."

"Which comes to the same thing," said Randal. "I have done it myself."

"As we came back into the house, a note was put into my hand. It seemed so mysterious that I felt I must read it in private. So I slipped away to read it.

"It was from Sir Wallace to Violet, telling her that everything was all right, that she was to be at such and such a place, as arranged, at three o'clock in the morning, and that she must go as she was, that she must be brave, and not fail him. It was not the first letter evidently. It referred to one she had received earlier in the day. I was stunned, as you can imagine. My one idea was to save Violet and to prevent Eustace knowing anything. It flashed across me that if I had

been mistaken for Violet she could just as easily be taken for me. I could not tell Bruce, so I seized upon a dear little subaltern with the face of a cherub and the clear eyes of a baby, and made him take me to the place.

"Off we started on a wild-goose chase. It took me ages to get the cherub to see that it was Christian Hope who had run away with Sir Wallace and Violet Windham who brought her back. Did you ever hear anything so foolish?"

"You brought her back?"

"Yes."

"Hampden was there?"

"I don't think he was, anyhow I brought her back, and Bobbie Salton was witness that Christian Hope had run away and Violet Windham had fetched her back. He did it beautifully, only he quite forgot he was duck shooting, which of course was rather an important item. However, it turned out all right. All over the station it was known that I had tried to run away and that Violet had fetched me back. The funny thing was that in a few days Violet grew to love the part of heroine and was so pleased at having behaved so splendidly. Now comes the funniest part of all! The station waited to see if Sir Wallace would marry me. He offered to, or I think Eustace would have killed him. It sounds like a comic opera, does n't it? I naturally refused, and Eustace said it was, under the circumstances, impossible that Violet should — know me."

"And she consented?"

"She tried not to — but I came home and we drifted apart. It was fatally easy. I doubt whether Eustace ever thinks of me now. He has climbed very successfully, and he left his sister-in-law very, very far down, almost at the bottom of the tree. When he gets high enough he may graciously bend with the bough — or bow with the bend — whichever you like. In the mean time the sister-in-law weeds in a garden and has buried all her troubles deep, deep down. The saddest thing is that Bobbie Salton was killed the following year on the frontier. Dear Bobbie, the importance of it all bewildered him. I think to the end of his days he thought he had compromised me, and he wrote me such a touching letter, offering to marry me. It was such a manly letter for such a baby to write. He said he would be willing to make what restitution he could even if — No, it is n't fair, it 's too sacred. That 's all, Randal," I said. "Is n't it funny?"

"It 's more damnably funny than you think," he said.

I was astonished. What could be funnier, unless it were Randal taking it like this? "What could be funnier?" I said.

"It appears that the whole thing was a joke."

"I was just saying that."

"Yes, but a joke of another kind."

"A practical joke?" I said.

He nodded.

"Some young cad made a bet that there was n't a

woman in the station who would n't run away with Hampden if she had the chance."

"They fixed upon Violet?" I said.

"He won his bet. He was chucked out of the service shortly afterwards."

We said nothing. I had to collect my thoughts.

"There was nothing Eustace would have hated more. Ridicule would have killed him."

"I should like to kill some one," said Randal.

"But why? It 's better — it 's funnier than I thought."

"There 's Bruce."

"I don't suppose it made much difference to him."

"He never married."

"No, but all men don't remain bachelors because they have been disappointed in love. Heaps are bachelors because they prefer it."

"It seems to me it was cruel — on you, too."

"Do you know, I began to think some time ago that it was not so cruel as I at first thought it was?"

"I may tell the story as I now know it if I like."

"I 'm not sure. It 's almost better to be thought wicked than to be made fun of! Anyhow it 's too good a story to be made common. You must own it 's funny, Randal?"

"I should like to catch the blackguard who perpetrated the joke."

"What a long word! We don't use them in Little Popham. The Howard children don't like them."

Then something dawned upon me.

"Randal," I said, "then — Wallace Hampden behaved rather well in asking me to marry him! I could bear anything better than that."

Randal did n't say anything. He seemed to have still something on his mind. "What is it?" I asked.

"I saw Violet yesterday."

I said nothing. I could n't.

"Have I said it too suddenly?"

Dear man — of course he had. Could he have said it more suddenly?

"Where?"

"At the Academy."

"Did you speak to her?"

"We had a long talk. We went into the Architectural room, which we naturally had very nearly to ourselves."

"Don't, Randal! Tell me things that matter — how did she look?"

"Very like you — but older."

"How could she?"

"Probably because she has n't spent so much of her life weeding and gardening."

"Tell me what she said."

"She told me the story I have told you. She only heard it a little time ago."

"Does Eustace know it?"

"He thinks the joke was played upon you, so he says it makes a great difference. He thinks even now that if you were to get married it would make it better all round. But he does n't mind Violet knowing you."

"Don't make me laugh, Randal, when I want to cry my eyes out."

Then he said that that was just what he did n't want me to do. And he went on to say that there was every chance of my marrying. Bruce was coming down.

He had broken it to me. Was it too sudden?

It was easier to bear that than the return of a sister after all these years.

"I have broken it quite gently then?" he said.

I told him nothing could have been gentler.

What a funny world it was. The quiet of Popham had not prepared me for such dramatic moments.

The most tragic part of the whole thing was that I felt too shy to write to Violet.

I had been robbed of an enemy. No wonder Sir Wallace always looked amused when he saw me. I had regained a sister, and—Bruce was coming down.

I wondered, would Violet write to me? She did, but only to say that she was starting immediately for Paris to get clothes. It was an odious time of year to go there; but she could n't bear to be less well dressed than other people. She wondered if I was smart! She was longing to see.

How horrified she would be if she knew! She would hardly imagine it possible that Jane was my Paris and Vienna rolled into one, and that the hat of one summer "did up" for the next.

We had grown apart, she and I.

XXXV

I WONDERED when Bruce would come to Popham, and how he would come, and why.

I knew a few days later. Margaret rushed into my room one morning.

"Dear Christian — do come. It 's lovely. The Staff are quite close on Scrubb's hill. Do come. Mother said I might if you would. I adore manœuvres. Things are so uncomfy at home. I can't imagine what 's the matter. Dad is in a terrible state because he has made a lot of money. He gets telegrams all day, and mother says if only he would learn not to meddle. It 's something to do with the Howards. Do come, Christian, just as you are."

How could I go with my heart beating with excitement? How could I meet Bruce calmly after all these years? Margaret insisted. Perhaps it was as well. It had to be got over. We went within view of Scrubb's hill. With Margaret's glasses I made out the group of officers — and finally the one figure I knew so well.

"You are wobbly, Christian," said Margaret. "Give me the glasses. I'm much calmer than you are."

If she had known! I remember how beautiful she looked in her pink frock, with her eyes sparkling and her cheeks flushed.

"I adore soldiers," she said.

Suddenly the man I had been watching detached himself from the others and came towards us.

In an agony of shyness I stooped down and picked a piece of thyme. I can still smell its warm sweet scent.

He came quite close to us — stopped — looked, and said, "You!" But it was into Margaret's lovely face he looked; it was her hand he held, which with all her love of romance must have bewildered her.

I turned and walked away.

There is a funny side to almost everything, I am sure, if one can find it. In this case I wondered where it could be. I found it. How could he, looking as he did, expect me to look as Margaret looked? It was so like a man.

I went back to my garden.

I got a note from him later. "Dear Christian, I heard of you from dear old Ran, and I find myself in your village. Do let us meet. There is nothing — after all — like old friends. I hear you are not married. It would be so nice to talk over old times. When may I come?"

I wrote and asked him to come two days later.

He came. "I should have known you anywhere!" he said.

I, not to be beaten, said, "If you wore a pith helmet, I should think we were in India again."

It was the last thing I wished to say, but when I am shy I always say the wrong thing.

"The shade of the helmet would have softened the

wrinkles," he said sadly. I didn't pity him in the least. The wrinkles didn't matter. His smile, for which he had always been famous, had resolved itself into faint lines at the corners of his eyes and the corners of his mouth. The smile was perhaps rarer than it used to be, but it was just as sudden and sweet. It had become an asset and a valuable one, that I could see. His voice was delightful, as it had always been, and I was very glad to hear it again — naturally.

My garden looked so bright and so gay. Life seemed altogether a most excellent thing. I had never looked forward more keenly to the future. I had never been so glad that I had my garden, my trout stream, and a hundred other things — all of which he found delightful.

"You have a charming view," he said. "What a long way you can see!"

I wondered if he saw as far as I did.

It was curious that when he mentioned Margaret's name things looked a little less gay than they had done a moment before. A shadow passed over everything.

We sat without speaking. I looked round for something to say, which is fatal. When I looked at the roses they hardly seemed worthy of being made the subject of conversation.

A welcome distraction came in the form of Jane. Across the lawn she walked with determination. In her hand she had a tray; on the tray, a card. I was surprised, but a look on her face silenced me.

"Her Grace," she said, "was sorry you were not at home, miss, and will call again."

Her Grace? I took the card in astonishment. Again a look on Jane's face prevented my saying anything. I looked at the card and read, "The Duchess of Rugby."

I was completely puzzled. However, there was reason in Jane's madness, I felt sure.

So Bruce Lawrence and I talked, with reservations, of the old days, but more of the present; they seemed safer.

We came back again to Margaret, then on to Randal Grey and soldiering, and far away to frontiers, and back again, by a surprisingly short route to Popham and Margaret.

At last out it came! Margaret was so like me — strangely like. Had any one ever noticed it?

I said, perhaps like what I used to be, and he very naturally said — well, any one can guess.

Then I said she was so beautiful.

"You think that?" he asked eagerly.

And I said, how could any one think anything else? It was our creed in Little Popham, we were so proud of our beauty; and so on.

"It is only the really pretty woman —"

"Don't say that, please!" I said.

He laughed. "It is delightful to see you again, Christian. D'you know I often thought of writing to you; would you have answered my letters?"

"I am considered a very bad correspondent," I said.

"I wonder if you are as forgetful as you pretend to be."

When he had gone I called Jane and asked her what she meant.

"Meant, miss, how?"

"You know quite well; that card! How did you get it?"

"Well, miss, it's best to be out with a thing and done with it. I suppose it came as an advertisement — from a stationer — Anyhow, I found it in your waste-paper basket — so!"

"So — what, Jane?"

"Well, miss, I brought it. I didn't see why he should think you had gone down in the world, since Indian days. It's truthful in a sense — if there was a duchess she would call — for your father's sake — if for nothing else."

In spite of my laughter Jane flew to the teapot that evening, why I don't know.

She is very fond of putting two and two together — as she calls it — and it invariably makes much more than four!

XXXVI

I WAS not unprepared for the time a little later — a very little later, as time goes — though in Margaret's eyes ages, when she burst in upon me and seizing me by both hands said, "Darling Christian, it 's all too heavenly. I never dreamed of such happiness."

She then described the perfections of the most brilliant man in the army, and how he had fallen in love with her at first sight. And all in one breath, Was it true he had known me in India, and had n't he been delightful then? And why had n't I told her about him?

"He said you were so pretty, Christian, that your complexion was the talk of India! Fancy a hero waiting till this blessed year to fall in love — with me!"

And was n't she lucky, and if she could have chosen out of the whole world there was no one else. Did I know his service record? Was n't it splendid?

"Oh, Christian, you are always so sympathetic! Shall I let you read one of his letters just to show —"

"No, please, Margaret! I don't think it would be fair."

"Of course, only to you. I should love you to see what he says." She put the letter back in her pocket. I was sorry to seem unsympathetic.

I was very sympathetic, really; and a little sorry that she had n't known her hero sooner; although she was so young it would have been no good. I resented her marrying a man so much older than herself.

But she was radiant, and the state of excitement in the village was beyond everything. Our beautiful Margaret engaged to a hero! who in the dark and from behind looked a boy still, and whose hair was only just turning grey — who was tall and very slight — who was desperately in love, as well he might be — and whose eyes followed her wherever she went; just like a collie dog's eyes!

That I traced to Miss Dorinda.

Lady Victoria was beside herself with excitement, for she too loved a soldier, and he adopted an attitude towards her which was a combination, partly of lover and partly of son-in-law prospective, which pleased her immensely.

So in this manner was our beautiful Margaret wooed.

But she was not the only one to have a love letter. There was this one: —

"While there was another — at least, while I thought there was — my lips were sealed, as I promised you, my most dearly loved Christian. But now I shall never give up hope until you do, by adding another name than mine to your Christianity. You are always doing something for the happiness of others. Why not concentrate and make mine perfect? I won't ask you to love me as I love you, because I doubt whether that would be possible. You see, mine is of such a long standing, its roots have struck deep, deep. Don't say you will pray for me, dear. I am past that. In all reverence I say it — I should not like to be interfered with! I should rather remain in love than be cured.

Make me your mission in life. Help me to be the man I should like to be for your sake. You have the power. When something within me drags me down from being that man, it is your hands, beloved, that lift me up. When something compels me to nobler things, it is your eyes that smile on me. I love you! Is not that enough for both of us? You say you are older than you once were. Who is not? What does age matter when it will be only a few girls too young to know the meaning of love who will say, 'Christian Hope engaged'! And a few boys who will say in the same sort of voice, 'Good old Ran'! I have loved you since you were young — Heaven knows how young you were — so young that you could look at me unmoved with those searching eyes of yours and not even read the look in mine. What is most precious in youth I still see in those eyes! If ever since those days we had been married, should n't I now — as a dutiful husband — be telling you every day how young you look? Of course I should.

"Now, Christian, for the last time, will you? If you don't like being engaged, don't be engaged. Why bother about a trousseau? Come away with me as you are, or for choice I would say in that blue tussore I believe you call it — that you wore last time I saw you, and if it were possible in the hat you wore three summers ago — that I suppose is not possible. Forgive me for being so stupid.

"Tell Somerset — is n't that the name that Jane will properly revert to? — that you want your boxes

packed, and come both of you to the end of the world, or anywhere you like. Turn the key in the cottage door. One last word and I 'm done! I cannot be your friend any longer."

That letter I would not show Margaret for all the world.

I read it through — well, it does n't matter whether once or twice. I rang the bell.

Jane answered it.

"I shall want a letter to go to Selford to catch the second post, Jane."

"Yes, miss."

Jane closed the door. A glimpse of her cap passing out of the door into the limitless ages of time was too much for me. Why should I accept such sacrifice at the hands of any human being?

"Jane," I said, "you remember that hat I had three years ago?"

"Which, miss?" said Jane.

It is the only thing that really upsets her, to be asked for a thing which has been discarded.

"Well, it had blue on it."

"Blue?" said Jane.

"Yes, rather a big hat. I don't suppose you do know where it is. I only wondered."

She sniffed.

In a few minutes she came back. In her hand she held the hat. Tissue paper filled the bows. "Oh, it *is* there!" I said.

"I don't know why I 've kept it so carefully. It

was pretty. But it's old-fashioned now, miss. You could n't wear it — not possibly."

"Let me try!"

I put it on. Jane stepped back a pace or two and looked at me with her head on one side. "It 's not so bad. It might be altered."

"I should like it altered, just enough to make it look wearable without completely changing it."

"Is it for a sort of a mother's meeting you want it, miss?"

"I thought perhaps it might do for a — wedding, Jane!"

"Miss Margaret's wedding? Never, while my name's Jane!"

"Somerset, then! Please, Somerset!"

XXXVII

JANE triumphed. I did not wear the blue hat to Margaret's wedding, which perhaps was as well. It was such a very grand wedding. There were special trains from London, and Little Popham did n't know itself. Miss Dorinda gave Margaret a prayer book — not a toast-rack — and there were other presents to the number of many hundreds. Lady Lawrence went away in rose colour, which suited her so well, and she wore her sables, not because it was cold but because they were so beautiful and they cost a small fortune. Sir Popham had made a lot of money lately, so people said. Not that he wanted it. So had the Durnfords, and Mrs. Durnford had been up to London to buy an overmantel. It was to go in the drawing-room — so people said.

When Margaret wished me good-bye she said, "You must get married, Christian. It 's simply glorious! I never enjoyed anything so much in my life."

After the wedding I went back to my cottage.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" I said.

Softly some one stole in and two little hands were put over my eyes.

"Guess who it is," said a voice.

"Jane," I said.

"No," with decision.

"Mrs. Barley?"

"No," with amusement.

"Mrs. Mangle?"

"No," with emphasis.

"Marshgold?"

"No," with glee.

"Betsy Marker?"

"No," with a chuckle.

"Miss Dorinda?"

"No," with determination.

"Miss Agatha?"

"No," with horror.

"Mrs. Durnford?"

"No," with impatience.

"Mrs. Dare?"

"No," with pity for my denseness.

"Mr. — Dare?"

"No," with ecstasy, "it's me!"

Peggy swung round on to my lap and put her arms round my neck.

"Mother says, will you come up to dinner, and will you stay all night and lots of nights? Do — do —! We are going to see the bonfires. Pat has been, and he says he saw the bons but not the fires."

I hesitated.

"You will, won't you? Mother sent you her best love. Will that make you come?"

"It might, Peggy; it's wonderful what love can do."

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